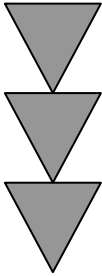
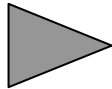


**VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY ANTHROPOLOGY:  
THE SOUTH-ASIAN CASE AND THE POSTCOLONIAL  
CONDITION**



**Roxana MARINESCU**



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***Introduction: anthropology and culture***

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In order to analyse some instances of violence in today's global context, more specifically in the South-Asian postcolonial space, I will try to (re)define the study object of anthropology. For this I would like to look first into the concept of 'culture'. By 'culture' I understand, as Ernest Gellner, whatever is transmitted non-genetically in an on-going human community, through a system of constraints, applied to a very wide range of situations. These non-genetic features turns a population into a community, separated from the species that genetically shares the same equipment (Gellner, 1995: 45-50). But how difficult or easy is it to distinguish between genetic and non-genetic traits? According to Clifford Geertz, it is very difficult, as what is innately controlled and what is culturally controlled in human behaviour is ill-defined and wavering. Culture is directly connected to human nature: we are "incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture – and not through culture in general, but highly particular forms of it" (Geertz: 50).

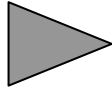


What about a multicultural space, which constitutes the object of my study for this paper? Is it just a juxtaposition of different cultures, living separately on their own, with their identifiable features and aims? Or does the co-existence of cultural units imply a continuous interchange among them and thus their very being is characterized by a mixture of elements from each? How can violence be read in these multicultural societies? I believe that a multicultural society is a puzzle of cultures with some individuality, and with many points of interference. But what characterizes it most is a definition and redefinition of the culture of the self in relationship with a culture of the other(s), which is done continuously and more often than not, painfully. In Werner Hamacher's terms, "multiculturalism is a term of struggle", as "there is no single culture that constitutes an autarchic, self-established, and self-sufficient unity. Every culture cultivates itself with regard to other cultures and is cultivated by other cultures" (De Vries and Weber: 295). Taking into consideration the past history, with all the encounters between different cultural spaces, especially the colonial past, which I am mostly interested in, and the globalized present of postcolonial context, we can clearly say that there is no 'Culture', but a multiplicity of cultures. In terms of defining these processes, Hamacher describes "cultures" as "cultivations", "multiplications", "multicultivations", which together with "acculturations", describe dynamic "movements of opening, movements in which what appeared only retrospectively as a secure possession gives itself over to what is not yet "there", to what has not yet been appropriated, what is not even known "as such" but nonetheless announces itself" (De Vries and Weber, 1997: 297). Multiculturalism in which one given culture predominates and is given precedence over the others is only disguised monoculturalism, monodemocracy. Indeed "majority rule" cannot possibly work in today's society, the simple rule of numbers shouldn't be significant in a power relation anymore. However, I believe this ideal (or Utopia, maybe?) has a long way to be achieved.

Connected directly with 'culture' of diverse human communities is the context in which it acts. The context I am interested in for the purpose of this paper is defined by the postcolonial or neo-colonial space, and the new 'cultural nationalism', as defined by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and You-me Park in their essay "Postcolonial Feminism/Postcolonialism and Feminism", as a form of valorisation of the past, the resurrection of religious symbols, the assertion of pride in indigenous languages, literature and the arts, and the resistance to alien knowledge and values. This new 'cultural nationalism' was mobilized in any colonial struggles in the service of forging a "national identity" (Schwarz & Ray, eds, 2000: 63). In many countries,



this decolonization process involved a transfer of power to national elites who continued colonial structures of rule, such as the legal system, the bureaucracy, the military, the judiciary, with the state as “a constitutive site of struggle, both as ally in bringing about desired legal changes and instituting welfare measures, and as adversary on account of its discrimination and coercive measures against women and minorities” (Schwarz & Ray, eds, 2000: 61-62).



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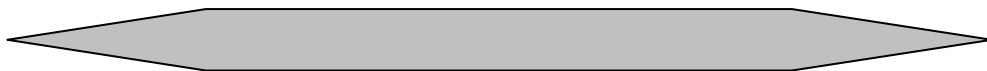
***Violence and female bodies in the South-Asian context***

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Specific sex/gender violent experiences in this post-colonial context (with an emphasis on the South-Asian space) can be discussed for female bodies (such as pregnancy, birth and motherhood, rape, suttee/sati as the ritual of self-immolation of Hindu women at the death of their husbands); male bodies (circumcision, sterilization under the state of Emergency in India) or the transgendered identities of the hijras in India. I will refer only to some of these experiences and give an account of some of the materials on these topics.

Sati/suttee is placed by Gayatri Spivak in a discourse of colonial critique and connected to the issue of the subaltern learning to speak (Nelson, Grossberg, eds, 1998: 295-305). Sati, the Hindu widow’s sacrifice, is presented from the point of view of the colonial subject as a signifier with the reverse social change, an important proof of women’s conformity to older norms at a time when these norms had become shaky within. The sentence “White men are saving brown women from brown men”, according to Spivak, “indicates a collective fantasy symptomatic of a collective itinerary of sadomasochistic repression in a collective imperialistic enterprise” (Nelson, Grossberg, eds, 1998: 296). Interesting enough, the ban of sati, its leap from private life into public life coincided with a changeover from a mercantile and commercial to a territorial and administrative British presence, therefore, more than a preoccupation with the situation of women, it shows a political and economic strategy of the Empire. Sati is a suicide which is no suicide, the dead husband is “the exteriorized example and place of the extinguished subject” and the widow is “the (non) agent who ‘acts it out’”. For the male subject sati means the felicity of suicide and for the female subject an unsanctioned suicide that is an exceptional signifier of her own desire, exceeding the general rule of a widow’s conduct. Spivak reads an ambiguity in the position of the indigenous colonial elite, starting from a position of nationalistic romantization



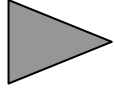
of the purity, strength and love of these women. Spivak concludes that white men, seeking to save brown women from brown men, impose upon these women a greater ideological constriction by absolutely identifying, within discourse practice, good wifehood with self-immolation on the husband's pyre.

In "Whatever Happened to the Vedic *Dasi*. Orientalism, Nationalism, and a Script for the Past" (Sangari, Vaid, eds, 1990: 27-87), Uma Chakravarti tackles the issue of sati at the intersection between the Indian view upon the past as a carrier of popular beliefs, mythology, tales of heroism and folklore and the imperialistic view of the same past. Sati is only one issue in her attempt to demonstrate how the myth of the golden age of Indian womanhood, as located in the Vedic period, has come to be shared by Hindus nowadays as a symbol of a historical consciousness forged roughly in the last century and a half. This image foregrounded the Aryan woman (the progenitor of the upper-caste woman) and simultaneously destroyed the image of the Vedic *dasi* (woman in servitude). The British colonial image of the sati was that it exemplified both the role of the 'faithful widow' and a model of a barbaric society. They emphasized the mystique of the Hindu woman who 'voluntarily' and 'cheerfully' mounted the pyre of her husband (Sangari, Vaid, eds, 1990: 31). The Indian perspective contained a highly intellectual argument: the goal for women as exemplified by the ancient Hindu legislators was 'devotion to the husband'. But the ultimate goal for all Hindus was 'selfless absorption in a divine essence', a union which could not flow from an action like sati.

In "Violence, Poisonous Knowledge and Subjectivity" (Das, Kleinman, eds, 2000: 205-225), Veena Das looks into the meaning of witnessing in relation to violence and the formation of the subject in the context of the Partition of India (1947), her fieldwork is done among Punjabi families, some of whom had been displaced after the war. Das claims that the experience of becoming a subject is linked to an experience of subjugation. She analyses the situation of women witness to violence (death of relatives) who then make this space of destruction their own not through an ascent into transcendence but through a descent into the everyday. This is done through the example of one woman, Asha, who "shows the creation of the gendered subject through engagement with knowledge that is equally poisonous but addressed through the everyday work of repair" (Das, Kleinman, eds, 2000: 208). Partition meant for some families significant changes in the situation of wealth within the kinship network due to forced displacement and death of family members. Help became in these conditions a strategy of survival, but the other side of the coin was a constant allusion to betrayal of trust, to infidelities, the failure to live up to the high moral ideals of kinship solidarity. The question is how the



violence of the Partition was folded into everyday relations, not how the events of the Partition were present in consciousness as past events but how they came to be incorporated into the temporal structure of relationships. The past enters the present not necessarily by traumatic memory, but as poisonous knowledge, according to Das and Kleinman (2000).



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*The South-Asian case: male lives and violence*

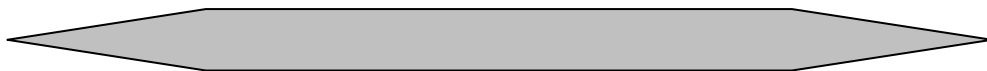
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A typically male (and more specifically Muslim male) experience is analyzed by Deepak Mehta: “Circumcision, Body, Masculinity. The Ritual Wound and Collective Violence” (Das, Kleinman, eds, 2000: 79-101), and placed in the space of India at the intersection of the Muslim and Hindu communities. Mehta examines the ritual of circumcision by seeing how the male body is constituted, eclipsed, and reformulated in three related domains: 1) how the body is constituted through the ritual of circumcision called ‘khatna’; 2) how in everyday life the ritual body is effaced under a series of verbal signs, signified by the term ‘musalmani’; 3) how an alternate imagination of the body emerges from the fact of being circumcised, seen in the significance of the term ‘katua’ (to cut). Here is the description he gives of the ritual of circumcision, at the intersection of physical sign, inscribed on the body, and its verbalized act in the community:

*In the ritual of circumcision the body is willed and represented so that it enters the domestic group and the community of Islam at the same time. The ritual conceives of circumcision as an eternal truth individuated on every male body. It thus describes the body’s metaphysic (...).In the process of constituting the male community, such conversations (about the ritual) substitute a collective body for the individual one. This substitution is achieved, first, by showing how the pain of the circumcision operation is distributed over every male of the community. Each male must bear this pain and witness it in another. Second, the conversations establish a fundamental difference between Muslims and Hindus. Both the ritual and everyday conversations show the power of circumcision to fabricate individual bodies (the ritual) and communities (everyday conversations).*

(Das, Kleinman, eds, 2000: 80)



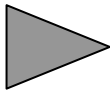
### *Violence in contemporary anthropology*

According to Mehta, during collective violence between Hindus and Muslims, the terms 'khatna' and 'musalmami' are suspended and replaced by 'katua', which privileges the wound, but as a stigmatized mark of identity of the other. The question to ask is in which ways circumcision as a mark of identity shapes and alters the destiny of individuals and of groups. Mehta suggests that there is a potential of collective violence (through wounding) to create (found in the ritual and the everyday) and destroy, the actors' experiences of violence are translated into either 'a sense of community' or the abrogation of 'what makes them human'. The second act of circumcision is its everyday re-enactment through male discourse on witnessing it. In this everyday discourse of circumcision the body becomes invisible, it is absented in two ways: the ritual wound is imbued with an incorporeal value, while the body is seen as the appendage of the community. The community is formed by males who have been through the same ritual and who then at some point in their lives, were asked to witness the ritual of circumcision being performed on somebody else – a feeling of brotherhood arises only after this act of witnessing has been performed, and this feeling is made valid by the claim in membership to the community of Islam. The body occupies two dimensions: the corporeal and the imagined (at the moment of its making it is embossed with a future). The act of wounding is willed and legitimated by restoring the body to the community, and simultaneously the wound constitutes the metaphysical body. It is interesting to see how Mehta places the ritual of circumcision on a temporal axis; the body is just a vessel through which the pre-existing wound is enacted. The relationship between the social and the spiritual principles is a relationship between the everyday and the ritual, and they have an existence beyond the individual one.

An extremely interesting analysis is made by Emma Tarlo ("Sterilization and Resettlement in Delhi" in Das, Keinman, eds, 2000: 243-271) on two policies of Indira Gandhi's government during the state of internal emergency declared in India in June 1975. They were both implemented in Delhi: the Family Planning Scheme and the Resettlement Scheme. Both are ways of brutal state intervention in the private lives of its citizens, with a clear and direct impact on the individual and the social body. The first policy attacked the reproductive will of the individuals by aiming to restrict the number of offspring in a family to two members, and the second one was characterized by state intrusion at the level of the home, and meant to beautify and impose order on the city by three major plans of action: demolishing, resettlement and tree planting. The two policies started as separate ones, but after a while began to operate in unison, trapping their victims, usually the lowest socio-economic strata of the city and to some extent whole religious groups (such as the Muslim one), or castes (such as the Untouchables). The



instruments of coercion were a network of incentives and increments (cash, promotions) and punishments (dismissals, evictions), the point of intersection of the two being later the receipt of allotments to resettle after demolishing of dwellings only at the show of a sterilization certificate. According to official statistics quoted by Tarlo (from the Ministry of Health and Family Planning), a record of 138,517 sterilizations (477 percent of the target) were performed in Delhi between 1975 and 1977. The analysis of the two policies should include an acknowledgement of the clear commodification of the bodies that they involved. The certificates of sterilization were sought from the closest family within a system of loyalties and acceptance of sacrifice, or from men lower in the social or institutional hierarchy. Also the persons to be motivated in view of sterilization were found through intermediaries; certificates were simply offered for sale; some women offered their bodies to intermediaries in exchange for such certificates.



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*Transgender violent experiences – the hijras*

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A special case of ‘violated body’ in India is that of hijras, a hybrid, with the boundaries between the two sexes and genders blurred and fuzzy to the extreme. The hijras are usually represented as men who are not quite ‘normal’, they are equated in Indian media or scholarship with ‘zenane’ (gay men), eunuchs, hermaphrodites, transsexuals and people who are transgendered. They sometimes speak of themselves as intersexed ‘people’ or gendered inverts (effeminate men) who may have been castrated or ‘emasculated’ (according to Geeta Patel in Schwartz and Ray, 2000: 417). Hijras wear women’s clothing and jewelry, and undergo a castration ceremony in which their penis and/or testicles are sliced off by a midwife without the benefit of painkillers in a ritual that is said to include moments that echo the ones performed for women during marriage and childbirth. The hijras then dance and sing at occasions such as births and weddings predominantly Urdu/Hindi songs drawn from genres like mystical (sufi) or films (often with love lyrics) or ‘curse’ songs. They are supposed to bring luck to a household, therefore they can demand and are given as much cash as the family can afford.



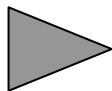
## *Violence in contemporary anthropology*

In explaining the hybrid sex/gender character of the hijras, Patel uses the metaphor of mayonnaise (taken from Maria Lugones in “Purity, Impurity and Separation”):

*‘Home-cooked’ mayonnaise supplies a useful metaphor for hybridity because the final product is visually and viscerally different from its constituents. Created in the mundane space of the kitchen, it is, under ordinary circumstances, used very different than its components. But its bland uniform yellow-whiteness, and its slippery light taste and texture elide the tastes, textures, and visual specificities of its component parts. Once you make mayonnaise you cannot revive, isolate or go back to its ‘original’ ingredients, and its visual homogeneity rests uncomfortably beside egg-shells and mixing bowls.*

(Schwartz and Ray, eds, 2000: 414)

Mayonnaise is both stable and unstable, it desanitizes hybridity, even as fears of disease, salmonella in the eggs, unclean kitchen utensils, infect the conditions of its making. It turns rancid as it travels, “so does a distilled and bottled queerness. Though queerness, if one mixes up the myriad uses of the term, is closer to an amalgam than an emulsion (in that it falls apart into its components easily) like mayonnaise it looks different than its ingredients – the practices, identities and sexualities that give it texture. In practice queerness has been deployed as an umbrella term for identities and embodied multiplicity (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, butch-femme, cross-dressing, third gender) as well as manipulated to read texts, against the grain for sexualities that do not fit the ‘norms’” (Schwartz and Ray, 2000: 416).



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### ***The nation, the empire and violence***

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The discussion of British colonialism in the region and the violence of this process, as well as the post-empire violence deserve a separate section. The layer is institutional violence of the Empire or the new merging state over the collective body of a nation (or several nations or ethnic groups). Also, from another perspective, we can discuss the violence perpetrated by certain groups against other groups and how this is experienced by each. Colonial violence has a different impact on the common bodies of both colonizers and colonized in different ways depending on spatial and temporal location, but more importantly on other factors,



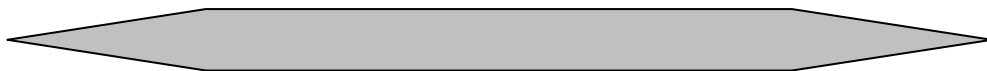


such as gender, caste, religious groups. Peter Van Der Veer makes the difference between official discourse of national history and the 'victim's tale', the way history is experienced by the individual protagonists of violence ("The Victim's Tale: Memory and Forgetting in the Story of Violence" in De Vries and Weber, eds, 1997: 186-200). History, as 'the grand narrative of the modern nation-state', includes the stories that different groups have about their past, about inner differences within the nation. These stories are reinterpreted and re-told according to the project of the national history of each state at a given moment in time. According to Der Veer, "History" as sign of the modern is central to the idea of "progress" or "development", and thus to both colonialism and the liberal nation-state. In fact, the history of colonialism is itself the history of the nation-state, both in England and in India:

*Although Britain and India are now both nation-states, in the colonial period only Britain was a nation-state, while India was a colony. This, at least, seems to indicate a time lag, in which colonizing Britain was an established nation-state and colonized India became one – perhaps as a result of colonization (...). Another way of putting this is to say that while Britain was colonizing India, England was colonizing Greater Britain, trying to unify what was not yet (and would only partially be) the United Kingdom.*

(De Vries and Weber, eds, 1997: 187)

In the Indian case, Der Veer identifies dark stories of terror or bloodshed that are memorized only to be remembered/forgotten, interpreted as either necessary steps towards liberation or as incidents of no consequence. So in fact there are two plots (or even multiple ones) when we talk of Indian history: the general one, involving the creation of the nation-state, and the other, parallel ones, different other violent events, subsumed to the greater violence, narrated separately in order not to diverge from the master narrative. But which one is the 'official' version? As Der Veer claims, in creating an official national version of history, more violence is being done of state institutions, such as the army, the police, but also from bottom up, from the victims themselves: the police records ignore massacres in which the police has been involved, or destroy evidence altogether. In communal riots, fire is a favourite instrument for destroying the bodies of the victims and their houses, so that the story of the victimized community can more easily be disputed. If memory of these events is not obliterated altogether, then only fragments of a story are remembered, leading to the image of the liberal nation-state. In this context,



### *Violence in contemporary anthropology*

“suffering and pain” acquire meaning from the larger story of progress; otherwise they would be “senseless”, incoherent, “without any meaning for the larger story” (De Vries and Weber, eds, 1997: 189). This narrative strategy is applied to the present as well as the past. The state uses it in order to complete the image of national history: the suppression of civil riots, as illegitimate and worrisome incidents, ‘senseless’ because they threaten not only the state’s monopoly of physical force but also its narration of its own legitimacy, is called ‘return to normalcy’, and the state uses ‘government’, not ‘violence’ to describe its own physical force.

Therefore, the urge in contemporary historiography and anthropology is to use the ‘victim’s story’, in order quite obviously to disrupt and decentre the singularity of the state’s narrative. In these parallel narratives, as indeed in the example provided by Der Veer (De Vries and Weber, eds, 1997: 190-191), the state is not represented as an instrument of the people, but as an evil, autonomous force outside of society, a force which is the cause of disharmony. The people, in their turn, are represented as essentially tolerant, peace-loving, and not given to religious strife. In the victim’s tale, violence does not come from individuals, but from the state. The victim’s tale also draws attention to the ambiguity of the relationship between nation and state. In the colonial period a divide-and-rule policy was enforced: religious communities were created, and then turned one against the other, so that the state could intervene to re-establish order. As that function increasingly failed, the single state was replaced by two nation-states, India and Pakistan, in which the rulers derived their legitimacy ‘from the people’. But the postcolonial state inherited the divisions of civil society which had been created in the colonial period: a policy of statistics, numbers, censuses, which created different caste associations and alliances going beyond spatial boundaries within which particular castes had meaning in terms of marriage and hierarchical arrangements. (De Vries and Weber, eds, 1997: 192). Another way through which the state tried to impose order by in fact inflicting violence on its citizens was the census. “Genocide by census redefinition” is a metaphor used by Clifford Geertz to exemplify the divisions of the population groups in India along linguistic lines, which was taken from an unpublished essay by M. Weiner, "Community Associations in Indian Politics". In the discussion of religion as a source of communal violence in India, Der Veer comes to the conclusion that it is difficult to consider it a source. Religion being at the core of a community as something immutable and non-negotiable, externalizing it in the same way as the state is impossible.

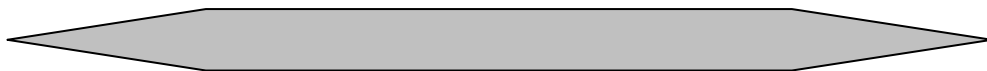


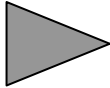
A quite different way of representing the violence of the colonial project is made by Ali Behdad (“Eroticism, Colonialism, and Violence” in De Vries and Weber, eds, 1997: 201-207). He moves away from the by now classical readings of the relationship between colonizer and colonized as a “Manichean allegory”, in which the former is a master exploiting the latter, his slave, to propose a vision of colonialism as “a violent ritual of erotic dissolution”, the aim of colonial eroticism being “to create a sense of political continuity by subjecting the colonized to a violent process of dissolution in which he or she is subsumed in the hegemonic power of the Empire” (De Vries and Weber, eds, 1997: 202). Colonialism works through violence and violation, and within this project they are not opposed to reason, but complete the colonialist logic.

*The aim is to achieve a state of dissolution that produces continuity between the two, at the cost of robbing the colonized of his or her difference. The colonizer views himself as the “active” agent and forces the colonized into the “passive” role, which must be dissolved as a separate entity to create the sense of colonial continuity. Dissolution can be achieved either through cold-blooded militarism – discipline, torture and pain – or through a benevolence and humanism that embodies pleasure, desire, sexuality.*

(De Vries and Weber, eds, 1997: 203)

In the former case, that of cold-blooded militarism, the colonizer occupies the position of torturer, assuming the active role of sacrificing, and setting himself to destroy the self-contained but discontinuous body of the colonized. Colonial torture is an attempt to penetrate the body of the other, in doing so it creates a sense of continuity between master and victim. The body of the colonized is characterized by difference, and this difference is the precondition for colonial dissolution. In the latter case, where: the colonizer assumes the benevolent position of the healer, erasing the marks of the torture inflicted by his militarist counterpart, the body of the colonized offers him the erotic vehicle for achieving the same state of dissolution. In this process the colonizer can pass over to the other’s side, can transgress to his victim’s body, by overcoming the limitations of colonial law. Torture, according to this benevolent colonizer, is a useful lesson about a rudimentary aspect of our humanity: the very physicality of our bodies. The body is ultimately the site where the desire to dominate is articulated.





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*Final remarks*

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I have started writing this paper in an attempt to describe the roles anthropology and ethnography play in the study of ‘violence’ today, a repositioning being necessary due to a clear reshaping of the cultures (or multicultures) we now experience. In order to do this, I have presented some ethnographic studies of certain gendered experiences in the postcolonial South-Asian geographic space. The presentation of individual body experiences and of the collective ones help drawing a clearer image of colonial history and postcolonial interpretations of it.

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