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The Tulsi Plant as Witness: Religion, Greed, and Displacement in Syed Waliullah's "*The Tale of a Tulsi Plant*"

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Abstract

In 1947, the Partition of India led to one of the greatest forced migrations in history and a legacy of shattered communities, abandoned homes, and continuing psychological trauma. In contrast to the largely communal violence and mass uprooting in many literary tales, Syed Waliullah's *The Tale of a Tulsi Plant*" explores the ethical conditions of Partition in the symbolic spaces of the abandoned home and the neglected tulsi plant. This paper suggests that this tulsi is a living archive of memory and reveals the overlaps between religion, greed, displacement, and moral ambiguity in post-Partition Bengal. Instead of characters being determined, irrevocable victims or perpetrators, Waliullah demonstrates how trauma is identified in history and how the individual becomes part of ethical compromises. Based on six authors, namely Homi K. Bhabha, Cathy Caruth, Urvashi Butalia, and Gyanendra Pandey, the study incorporates the tenets of postcolonial and trauma theory as it unfolds in the era of Neoliberalism, which the study explores in this context. The study uses postcolonial and trauma theory authors like Homi K. Bhabha, Cathy Caruth, Urvashi Butalia, and Gyanendra Pandey; these authors are used for the analysis of the depiction of memory, identity, and failure of institutional justice in the story. Focusing on close reading, the paper shows the quiet manner in which Waliullah's story conveys and how, through his symbolic portrayal of the tulsi plant, he disrupts communal boundaries and highlights the ongoing human toll of Partition. In sum, the narrative implies that although memory and moral responsibility can seem like a form of internal politics, they nevertheless remain in the domestic spaces that are left behind, even when there is no political state to which they belong.

Keywords: Partition, Tulsi Plant, Displacement, Trauma, Memory, Postcolonialism

Introduction

Since 1947, when British India was divided, this acute violent conflict has created a huge amount of violence, uprooting, refugees, and permanent rewriting of cultural identities, which is an unprecedented event. Over 15 million people moved across newly drawn national boundaries, and "countless families left behind their stories, their livelihoods, and their homes, seeking safety" (Butalia 3–12). The human impact of Partition was not limited to partition itself, but had left a psychological scar, conditioning individual and collective identity for generations. As Gyanendra Pandey argues, "Partition cannot be understood merely as a political event because it fundamentally altered everyday human relationships and transformed memory into an enduring site of historical conflict" (Pandey 1–15). Literature, as a result, comes to be one of the most important ways of capturing and retaining the events of trauma, displacement and fractured belonging.

Syed Waliullah is one of the significant writers in Bengali who wrote on the Partition era, and he stands alone in this aspect because of his subtle psychological realism and symbolic narration. The quiet aftermath of historical catastrophe is a theme explored here: unlike many Partition narratives, which make scenes of communal violence a focal point, *The Tale of a Tulsi Plant* sees Mrs Rahman taking up residence in a left-behind Hindu home, where the tulsi plant still lives. It's not such a story of bloodshed, but of ordinary people trying to rebuild their lives while feeling a moral uncertainty. This ethical question is raised right after the refugees settle in the abandoned house: "It did not occur to them that they were committing a crime in broad daylight. If a pang of guilt rose in anyone's mind, it evaporated quickly in the thrill of their triumph" (Waliullah 18). The passage sets up the main paradox of the narrative: those who are displaced, themselves, become benefactors of the faulty displacement of another family. The abandoned house is more than just a physical space. It is transformed into a symbolic space where absence, memory and historical violence converge.

In the beginning, the refugees see the building just as an opportunity to survive. But the perception is totally different after the discovery of the neglected tulsi plant. The narrator writes, "half-dead, dried, insignificant tulsi plant, caught unaware, had revealed the secrets of the house" (Waliullah 22). The plant is also placed there to suggest that there was once more life in this house, that another family lived in the same home the characters once lived in; this is evident in the way the characters reminisce about their own family's life in their home. It's an admission that by doing this, Waliullah has turned focus away from who owns what to who belongs

where: Memory can't be erased just because people would or should have been forced to leave. Also, the image of the tulsi plant becomes the overarching sign through which the story questions the communal identity.

Modabber at once wants to destroy it and says, "You don't see the tulsi plant set up in the ritual way on the platform? It has to be torn out. While we're in this house, no Hindu symbols can be tolerated" (Waliullah 21), he said while living here. His reply demonstrates the fright caused by the Partition in the community, as well as the reluctance of other residents who are reluctant to comply. That beneath political rhetoric, they know of shared human suffering, and they are silent. However, as Homi K. Bhabha observes, postcolonial identities are produced through negotiation and contradiction rather than fixed ideological categories (Bhabha 145–49). Rather than that, Waliullah undermines the presentation of his characters as exemplary moral beings by underscoring the uncertain connection between history and morality, implication and obligation.

It also explores how an everyday household routine preserves a traumatic memory. Though the Hindu family is never seen, the tulsi plant is mentioned, and the narrator of the story has a vision of the love that the once-absent mistress held for it: "wherever she was, when the shadows of dusk thickened in the sky, she would remember the spot under the tulsi plant and her eyes would fill with tears" (Waliullah 22). This created memory is a memory that keeps coming back, a thought that will not go away, a thought that does not stop coming up as recollection, as memory, as imagining memory, as memory of this imagined memory – and that is what Cathy Caruth means by "understanding of trauma as an experience that continues to return through recollection rather than remaining confined to the past" (Caruth 4–9). In this way, the tulsi plant is no longer just a religious object but a storehouse of cultural memory that will not be erased.

Waliullah's critique of the postcolonial state is also important. The police report on the unlawful occupation is "a complicated, neither-for-nor-against and neither-right-nor-wrong report" (Waliullah 19–20), which exposes the moral emptiness of bureaucratic institutions in the wake of Partition. But the state only delays the issue, another way of avoiding any real justice; ethical ambivalence remains. Urvashi Butalia argues that official histories of Partition often silence the intimate experiences of ordinary people in favour of political narratives (Butalia 10–18). In the face of that silence, Waliullah finds history in domestic space and has gathered objects like the tulsi plant, which hold onto memories that governments and institutions don't recognise.

This paper takes the view that *The Tale of a Tulsi Plant* uses the symbolism of the tulsi plant to explore the complicated religious and material conflicts of greed, displacement, and moral responsibility in the post-Partition world. The study, informed by post-colonial and trauma theory, shows how Waliullah overturns easy communal binarisms and represents the displaced person as a victim and as an agent of historical injustice. The narrative's final push is that in a world of conflict, unmarked borders and uneasy intentional boundaries have as much impact on human lives as formal treaties between nations.

The Tale of a Tulsi Plant is set post-Partition of India, but in no way are there any scenes of communal violence; rather, the moral impact of the displacement is the centre of attention. The house in the middle of the story, which is abandoned and destroyed, serves as a symbolic space in which memory, survival and moral dilemma intertwine. Urvashi Butalia observes that the enduring legacy of Partition is often preserved in the everyday experiences of ordinary people rather than in official political histories (Butalia 3–12). Similarly, in the work of Waliullah, the issues of history are introduced in domestic space.

Syed Waliullah's *The Tale of a Tulsi Plant* is a tale of the tulsi plant as its main character. Taken as if sacred to Hinduism and placed in the courtyard of an abandoned house at the start of the narrative, it eventually becomes a symbol of memory, cultural identity and the emotional toll of Partition. Waliullah uses this basic household item to show that politics and other forms of violence may send people begging on the streets, but not their memories. As Homi K. Bhabha argues, domestic spaces often preserve cultural identities that survive political upheaval (Bhabha 1–18).

The value of the plant is evident immediately after its discovery in the symbolic sense. "Then one day the tulsi plant was discovered, growing on a rectangular brick platform about a foot high, at the edge of the yard behind the kitchen" (Waliullah 21). Up to that time, the house appears to the refugees to be just abandoned. However, the tulsi plant demonstrates that it is a plant that belongs to a family whose emotional presence remains even if they are gone. Its religious significance is recognised, and Modabber insists that it should be removed: "The green leaves had taken on a brownish colour, and weeds grew thickly beneath it" (Waliullah 21). The tulsi is like its uprooted owners, abandoned, so it is not so much a marker of religious distinction as one of common human suffering.

This symbolism is further enhanced by the response of the refugees. Because of Modabber's command: "Nobody moved" (Waliullah 22). They are hesitant and

seem not to understand that if all the plants are destroyed, the memory of those who once inhabited the house would be erased. The narrative culminates with the moral point of view of the narrator's particular emotions at dusk, when he thinks about what the absent mistress of the house would do to her tulsi plant at that time, and recalls that "the mistress of the house lighted a lamp under the tulsi plant at dusk" (Waliullah 22). The tulsi is therefore a living memory, which exemplifies Cathy Caruth's argument that trauma persists through recurring acts of remembrance rather than remaining confined to the past (Caruth 4–9).

The plant then starts getting better, and the narrator says, "The leaves which had grown brown with lack of water were turning dark green again. There was no doubt that someone was tending the tree" (Waliullah 23). The inaction of tulsi-watering represents how compassion continues to be expressed without any emphasis on differences between communities. Political rhetoric incites hostility; private acts of caring show an enduring sense of common humanity.

The tulsi plant becomes the ethical core of the story, despite transcending its religious boundaries. It captures the consolations of the displaced family; it confronts communal prejudice and tells the refugees that a house cannot be divorced from the people that lived in it and shaped it into their home. One such constant reminder is Waliullah's tulsi plant, which bears witness to the fact that memory and belonging can't simply be erased by political borders.

The character of Modabber is the most complicated of the story of *The Tale of a Tulsi Plant*, psychologically speaking. Syed Waliullah does not want to either demonise or idealise him; instead, he is a normal refugee stuck between what they need to keep themselves alive and what is the moral thing to do. The story explores the Partition experience as it shatters the demarcations of victimhood and complicity when Modabber's attitude towards the tulsi plant changes. Partition literature often problematizes innocence and guilt as a binary model, as Gyanendra Pandey writes; mass displacement causes ethical confusion through the freedom literature (Pandey 14–18).

The deserted house is a place where other refugees live, and for Modabber, a chance to start again. The narrator remembers them: "they all came in a group, broke the lock at the gate, and entered the house with great excitement" (Waliullah 18). Their joy soon eradicates any realisation that they are committing a crime. Extreme historical situations mould moral considerations to ensure survival seems to be more important than justice, says Waliullah.

After the tulsi plant was discovered, the communal attitude was clearly seen in Modabber's. His requirement suggests that Partition produced communal fears, with religious symbols being the objects of ideological persecution. But Waliullah soon puts the spines of all the men on edge. The refugees' silence is perhaps the indication of an unspoken recognition that the plant symbolizes not only another religion but also the memory of a displaced family.

Modabber knows that the turning point has come when he notices that the neglected tulsi has started to recover. The commitment to anonymous care for the plant represents an ongoing compassion not only in the face of demonstrations of common identity, but in the face of pubic expressions of common identity. Human empathy lives on in the shadows when all is dark, suspicion and fear.

Modabber's answer shows the man's inner conflict. He took a thin, long bamboo rod, and "slashed it across the plant as if to chop it, but the branch went harmlessly across the plant" (Waliullah 23). The meaning of this action is left open by Waliullah. The tulsi is not destroyed by the Modabber even if the blow is missed, either by accident or if it is unconscious. The reluctance reflects a greater sense of personal conscience than of ideological rhetoric. Memory and humanity are the symbols of victory, not communal hatred.

Even with this moral revolution, Modabber never gives up the house and never admits his own wrongness that he is living in the house of another family. As an ex-queer, he is a proud representative of a community that compels his sympathy to remain incomplete, as Homi K. Bhabha remarks, "postcolonial identities are contradictory, they are necessary, and they are ethically questionable" (145–49). Modabber thus isn't totally at fault and is not totally innocent, but is a mirror image of the complex moral terrain of Partition.

Modabber's psychological metamorphosis serves as a powerful illustration of how Partition was, at its worst, not an inhuman tragedy, but one with the loss of moral clarity. He can't kill the tulsi plant, nor can he bring back the justice to its rightful owner, thus making him one of the most interesting characters in the narrative due to the moral conflict which he has faced while living in the society post-partition.

"The Tale of a Tulsi Plant" also offers a critique of the new postcolonial state's bureaucratic apparatus. Waliullah shows the role of official institutions as morally unconcerned and also as either inefficient or ineffective in coping with the human impacts of the Partition. Instead of justice, there is only bureaucracy, and it's a process that handles the displacement impersonally. The violence during Partition was worsened by institutional failures, as Gyanendra Pandey notes, which intensified

the violence of Partition by institutional failures that left countless people without legal or moral protection (Pandey 87–95).

It is during the first investigation by the police that the incompetence of the state is revealed while they investigate the illegal occupation of the left out house. Despite what may be a lax attitude to law and order by the authorities, their involvement does not lead to any tangible results. The narrator comments, "The police worked out 'a complicated, neither-for-nor-against and neither-right-nor-wrong report'" (Waliullah 19–20). This self-deprecating description reveals a bureaucracy with a refusal to declare the difference between justice and injustice. Official neutrality turns into a way to avoid responsibility and not a way to resolve conflict.

This uncertainty of the law is exploited by the very refugees. They declare, "We are poor clerks, but we are the sons of gentlemen. We know the law, too" (Waliullah 19), for they believe that it is unlikely that the original owner(s) will return. Their statement is a comment on the morality that resulted from Partition, in which the very point of living becomes to question conventions of law. Waliullah does not so much condemn as he shows that historical crises are used to make the boundaries invisible between what is permitted by law and what is necessary to human life.

The State's indifferent attitude is amplified when the investigation is covertly dropped. The role of the speaker is mentioned as this: "to file it away on a shelf" because "the official rules about illegal occupation were not quite clear" (Waliullah 20). The delay by the bureau, therefore, constitutes another example of injustice. Official institutions often reduce the lived experiences of Partition to administrative records while ignoring their human dimensions, as pointed out by Urvashi Butalia (Butalia 189–95). That imbalance between process and proper behaviour is echoed in Waliullah's acting.

The illusion of security finally ends with the second visit by the police. This time, the officers say, "You'll have to leave the house within twenty-four hours. Government orders" (Waliullah 24). Indeed, the eviction is not a return to one's legitimate or rightful owner. The officer's response to Modabber's question of "Has the owner complained?" is "The government has requisitioned the house" (Waliullah 25). This exchange indicates that the state is more interested in administrative control than historical justice. Meanwhile, the Hindu family for whom this is home and the refugee tenants of the property have no power over the bureaucracy.

The end of the story is the neglected tulsi plant, which began to wither again: "No one watered it since the advent of the police" (Waliullah 25). Its fall represents

the failure of the State to achieve either justice or memory. This measured criticism implies that the bureaucratic order which followed colonialism, and which was inherited by the postcolonial state, had retained the power of the colonial state but has not taken responsibility for assuaging the moral wounds of Partition. The consequence is a system which administers property but, in that very capacity, denies humanity.

In a dismantling of Partition, Waliullah explores the impacts of political ideology in the gradual moulding of individual consciousness in the aftermath of Partition through Maksud. Maksud presents a more rational and secular perspective in his responses, which is unlike Modabber's, whose motivations stem mainly from his insecurity and possessiveness. As Homi K. Bhabha argues, postcolonial identities are continuously negotiated within unstable historical and political conditions rather than remaining fixed (Bhabha 2–5).

The refugees turn their backs on the tulsi plant, but they can't free themselves from its symbolic presence. The narrator says, "The tulsi stood untouched; it had escaped their hands. But they did not completely forget it. Rather, a sense of weakness lingered with them" (Waliullah 23). During one such discussion, Modabber claims, "The country was partitioned because of their wickedness and meanness and fanaticism" (Waliullah 23). His statement, in short, gives the Partition a communal explanation to allow the refugees to justify themselves for occupying the abandoned house. Waliullah brings to light the extent to which political rhetoric can substitute for historical knowledge and prejudice. Communal narratives frequently transform historical suffering into collective blame, reinforcing social divisions rather than encouraging reconciliation, as Gyanendra Pandey observes (Pandey 39–46).

But Maksud is alone in challenging this intolerance, saying, "Aren't you going too far? (Waliullah 23)." His short speech was one of moderation among them. But Waliullah so

One of Waliullah's best uses of the narrative is to almost completely remove the original Hindu owners of the house from the narrative. They don't talk or come back to their home, but their presence is always felt through the tulsi plant and the deserted house. This all gestures to one of the greatest tragedies of Partition: displacement does not just take away people's homes from them; it takes away their voice as well. There is one powerful word, "The owner had run away" (Waliullah 18), in the story to present the former owners of the house. Though this sentence is short, it still tells the terror, doubt, and coercive bodily movements of millions of people that happened during Partition.

But Waliullah doesn't bother to go into too much detail regarding acts of violence—for in the end, it is what is not narrated that is most telling, as the emotional weight of displacement is clearly taken across by that which is absent. In this way, the abandoned house is more than an empty structure but becomes a silent witness to the interrupted life of a family. This presence in the invisible realm is strengthened with the tulsi plant. "Half-dead, dried, insignificant tulsi plant... had revealed the secrets of the house" (Waliullah 22), to the narrator. The finding brings to mind that another family used to inhabit the home and changes the house from an "abandoned" property to a remembered house, or "home" for the refugees.

The symbolic object is a means for Waliullah to imply that memories do not vanish because people have been displaced on the political "other side of the border." What is emotional about the story is the narrator's imagination of its previous mistress. Waliullah gives the woman back her humanity by depicting her in his words. As Cathy Caruth has written, it can be believed that "trauma often survives through recurring remembrance rather than direct narration" (Caruth 4–9).

The ending reinforces this symbolism. The fading of the tulsi plant becomes a sign for the inability of the bureaucracy and new residents to resocialise the lost emotions because of Partition. It is and will always be the case that it lost its original proprietors. The last sentence—"The tulsi plant did not know why it was thus; it was for people to understand" (Waliullah 25)—puts the moral burden on the reader. History cannot tell itself, says Waliullah; only human contemplation can face the moralities of uprooting and communal hatred. To commemorate Partition demands not just a documentation of historical facts, but also an ethical injunction on younger generations, as Gyanendra Pandey notes (169–75).

Waliullah uses absence as a potent literary device, as the displaced family does not speak. For them, the tulsi plant has become their voice that cannot be taken away by political violence, bureaucratic power, or communal ideology. The story ultimately serves to remind the reader that homes can be left behind and history can be rewritten, but the emotional content of memory must still be acknowledged.

Conclusion

Syed Waliullah's *The Tale of a Tulsi Plant* is a profound exploration of the moral and psychological dimensions of the Partition of India. While not showing communal violence on paper, Waliullah explores its fallout through an abandoned house and a neglected tulsi plant, asserting that 'the deepest wound of the Partition is in the memories, displacement and moral ambiguity.' Even though the refugees are victims of forced migration, their presence in other people's houses distinctly shows

how historical traumas can bring new dispossession. The story avoids any easy concept of "victim" and "perpetrator," rather showing the ethical complexity of survival in times of historical crises.

The tulsi plant is a symbol, preserving the memory of the displaced Hindu family long after they disappear from the story. The shift of this item over time from a religious object to a living memory of loss shows us that domestic space has emotional and cultural histories that continue to carry across political borders. The absence of the mistress is not a disruption of the past, and the reappearance of the tulsi plant in the remembrance done by the speaker brings up an issue of how trauma can never go away; it always has to come up again as a recurring memory—a position Cathy Caruth took on (Caruth 4–9). Likewise, Urvashi Butalia's focus on everyday memories and domestic histories highlights Waliullah's depiction of the house as a place of the human experience of Partition (Butalia 9–18).

The story also condemns communal politics and the postcolonial bureaucracy for being morally bankrupt. Modabber's attempts to eradicate the tulsi plant, the ideological conflicts among the refugees, and the government's apathetic intervention show how it cannot be dealt with by referring to a communal identity or state authority that responds to the refugees' needs for justice. Rather, Waliullah argues, historical reconciliation means acknowledging the humanity of the other, the other who was made invisible by political violence. This vision of ethics is in accord with the idea of the postcolonial nation as a place of negotiation, contradiction, and unfinished histories, rather than fixed identities, in Homi K. Bhabha 145–49.

The last lines—"The tulsi plant did not know why it was so. It was for people to understand" (Waliullah 25)—place the responsibility for interpretation on the reader. Waliullah is not about giving quick fixes or answers of right or wrong; he feels that the moral implications of Partition are a constant subject for reflection.

In short, *The Tale of a Tulsi Plant* reveals that a second Partition, which is not so much about territory as about never-ending ruptures of memory, belonging, and moral responsibility, is the common factor. Waliullah uses symbolism in the form of the tulsi plant, an abandoned house, and the family's silence, which renders an ordinary domestic object a permanent record of history. His unique style of narration and psychological realism work well in preserving the authenticity of the story within the partition literature. Against this backdrop, it becomes obvious that though borders between nations may divide, memory of loss and the need to assume moral responsibility never do.

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