



Choosing to Belong: Nirmal Verma's Postcolonial Modernity

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Abstract

In a key non-fictional work of his—*Itihaas, Smriti aur Akanksha*—the Hindi novelist Nirmal Verma considers two sets of relationships: one between history and memory and the other between modernity and selfhood. This paper argues that Verma's often ambivalent relationship with European modernity and history is held in deep tension with his restitutive celebration of a self, apprehended through *smriti* (memory) and *akanksha* (desire). As one of the most significant writers and thinkers in post-independence India, Verma's works traverse an uneasy journey from anti-colonialism to decolonization. What does it mean to decolonize? Does decolonization expose the problematic and essentially ambiguous nature of the contemporary and its sense of history? If history and the present are invariably implicated in the notion of self, is it possible to resurrect a self beyond a modernity-conditioned history and the present? How do we account for human agency in the politics that understands selfhood either as recuperative or reactive? These are some of the questions that energize Verma's analyses of the notions of time, self and history. Positing a notion of selfhood away from the Europeanized constructions of history and time, Verma is equally reluctant to commit to a tempting but analytically less significant model of selfhood based on tradition and indigeniety. Instead, nature and art are the twin repositories that redress modernity's dual insistence on postcolonial selfhood. Verma's analyses of the philosophical and aesthetic models of nature and art are woven around determining selfhood as 'a-human'. In positioning selfhood as an affirmation of an 'a-human' memory, nature and art, this paper demonstrates Verma's epistemological destabilization of modernity's claim on the self.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Decolonization, History, Modernity, Selfhood.

Nirmal Verma (1929–2005) is a representative writer and thinker of modern Hindi in post-independence India. Credited with pioneering the *Nayi Kahani* (New Story) movement, Verma's fiction, his memoirs, essays and travelogues capture a profound struggle with questions of modernity and the location of the postcolonial self. While Verma's works of fiction are outside the scope of this paper, I attempt hereto identify

his account of Indian history and time as a symptomatic site of complex intersections of postcolonial ambiguities and anxieties.

Postcolonial historiography in India is caught between two broad strands of theoretical locations. On the one hand, it vacillates between the metropolitan (Marxist) repudiation and (colonial-nationalist) romanticization of the nation-state's 'moment of arrival'. On the other hand, the radicalized subaltern discourses' attempts to unsettle elitist preoccupations with colonial-nationalist and 'progressive' positions remain equally fraught by 'being written in the first-world academy' (Prakash 1992: 8–10). Verma's critique of modern history calls for problematizing the assumptions of empirical authority and liberated agency.

Verma has sometimes been dismissed as a writer who while writing in Hindi adapts European concerns and techniques in his fiction. The reception of his essays has been equally polarizing, impugning his worldview as an artificial evocation of Indian traditions.¹ Even as Verma remains a contentious figure, reading him beyond the simplistic renditions of his corpus is important for his work reflects a complex dialogue between the colonial past and the postcolonial present, individual history and communal memory. Verma's choice of Hindi (as opposed to English, which is considered the language of privilege in India), his range of references and his rhetorical strategies reveal the trajectories of contradictory intellectual impulses and their historical-political assertions that shaped one of the most turbulent periods of independent India. Verma was one of the first intellectuals to register protest against Indira Gandhi's suspension of democracy and declaration of Emergency in 1975. His disenchantment with India's emancipatory political inheritance of nationalism, which involved the mobilization of a predominantly Hindu sensibility and a simultaneous identification with a discursive collectivity challenge any straight forward interpretations. However, the contradictions embedded in his work continue to resonate and haunt the institutions of postcolonial thought in crucial ways, reinforcing decolonization not as a tractable phase in the evolution of postcolonial societies but as ontologically continuous and radical.

Introducing Verma to an English-speaking readership, South Asian historian Mahmood Farooqui, calls him 'A humanities enriched and enriching individual' who 'moves beyond the conditionalities of decolonisation and post-colonialism in this new global and de-territorialised world' (www.himalmag.org).

The clue to Verma's complex position regarding history and the deployment of a compounded rhetoric around it can be discerned most intensively in *Itihaas, Smriti aur Akanksha* (referred to as *Itihaas* from here on). First published in 1992, the book is a collection of lectures that Nirmal Verma delivered to commemorate the famous archaeologist Dr Hiranand Shashtri, father of the acclaimed Hindi poet and Verma's elder contemporary Agyeya. This philosophically charged, brooding analysis of the concept of selfhood and time is breath-taking in its scope and ambition. The three terms, *itihaas* (history), *smriti* (memory) and *akanksha* (desire) correspond to the tripartite division followed by the essay. The first chapter deals with the historical foundations of modernity (*itihaas*), the second considers the ways in which this pervasive modernity can be creatively appropriated through a postcolonial

restructuring of the constitutive templates of history (*smriti*) and the third how a desire for a cohesive formulation of human time and history can be located in art and aesthetic experiences (*akanksha*).

It is important to note that Verma's critique of modernity (in India) engages with the problematics of Hindi readership and critical thought exemplified in the double insecurity felt by many Hindi writers. By the 1960s, the southern states in India had rejected Hindi as an official language, thereby eroding its primary constituency as a national language. Secondly, there was a strong political thought that continued to view Hindi as a substitute (of English) and also as provincial, incapable of challenging generic and cultural prescriptions of metropolitan English on pan-national questions of identity and history (Reddy 2012).

In interrogating the decolonized historical self, Verma's underlying commitment is two-fold: first, to reinstate Hindi as a language that could produce authentic secular narratives of Indian character, and second to evaluate and engage with critical debates to authenticate and evolve the existing idiom without being charged as imitative or derivative. But questions of nation and identity in language(s) caught in protocols of state power cannot but explicitly or implicitly rehearse the institutions and hierarchies that constituted them in the first place and therefore remain 'premised on knowledge-theft, muzzling, and selective storytelling' (Sium and Ritskes 2013: iv). To identify the unfolding of decolonization in Hindi,² is thus to actively perpetuate and replicate a dual tension: first, that which implicates Hindi's own logic of existence as a 'national' language by seeking to reveal its fractious and contending relationships with vernacular epistemologies that have greater claims of authenticity, and second that which insists on insinuating indigeneity to the elitist challenges of the global apparatus of English and its attendant discourses of modernity.

If to inhabit the postcolonial condition is to recognize all subject positions as inherently complicit in colonial forms of knowledge production, then securing Verma's essay in this representational frame allows him to be positioned as doubly ambivalent. Verma's attempts to continuously address the scope and breadth of Hindi through substantial writings on modernity and history remain unique, shaped by a concern about his readership and an implicit nostalgia for a sensibility that is not fraught with and condemned by a double guilt. At the same time, an awareness of the impossibility of the task he is committed to sustains rhetoric of tradition that must be seen as an act of creative recuperation where much is lost but something can be gained.

In projecting a comparable aesthetics of time, Verma's work demands to know whether there is a way in which postcolonial modernity allows the incongruity between European and Indian modes to actually produce a creative synthesis. Or, to consider the same dilemma from a more open-ended perspective: what kind of postcolonial response is a modernist poetics? And what kind of a modernist response is an anti-modern postcolonial rhetoric? This is productive ground for a further set of considerations: how does the rhetoric of *smriti*, its symbolic representations that Verma appropriates from ancient India/Hinduism, relate to a modernist conceptualization of history? Does the question of aesthetic autonomy that Verma

resurrects as a challenge to progressive history help us characterize his poetics distinctively?

Before examining Verma's particular postcolonial ambivalence towards modernity, it is useful to briefly iterate the historical context with which he engaged and the specific intellectual traditions that he sought to identify and contribute to. Within this context, I then seek to establish and problematize Verma's own position.

Universal history and the postcolonial nation

In his ground breaking work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (1998), suggests that one of the crucial conditions that made the idea of nationhood possible was the emergence of a modern conception of time. This conception of time was marked by two crucial characteristics: linearity, a clear-cut separation of the past from the present and temporal plurality and simultaneity.

'Nation-building', a project of modernity is marked by a persistent implementation of state technologies to subsume local horologies and histories. State technologies such as those of scientific mapping, census, standardized money and the institutionalization of 'national' time paved the way for the imagination of a homogenized, abstract measure of time and a bounded space within which the national principle was delimited. The particular nation-state in question thus emerged as a concrete and determinable 'geo-body'. This finite geo-body was marked off, almost eternally it seemed, from other such spatial entities. Ostensibly, the 'reality' and destiny of a particular nation-state was contained within the self-perpetuating enclosure of its demarcated boundaries. Yet, however much state technologies tried to describe and fix 'reality', some elements invariably slipped out of their grasp and lingered as unsettling remainders.

Further, the question of nationhood and identity in derivative postcolonial societies remains forever hanging between institutions of avowal and resistance to secularization of selfhood through state technologies. History and nationhood in postcolonial societies can only exist under surrogate conditionalities—territorially and temporally assumed but always deferred, suspended between a 'former colony' and a 'not-yet nation'. In his essay 'Some Reflections on the Self and the Other' (*India and Europe* 1991), Verma compares the evolution of European modern consciousness to the stunting preconditions of the colonial-Indian context that proscribed and defined the Indian encounter with modernity. Citing examples from several Enlightenment thinkers and their modernist champions from Hegel to Husserl, from Schopenhauer to Heidegger, Verma claims 'Their images of India were developed by a recognizably distinct European consciousness. India, on the other hand, because of its unfortunate historical situation, did not have that "full" space, in which it could develop its own images of Europe...the space was occupied precisely by the same "object", whose images India was supposed to imitate, Europe' (*India*: 41).

In ascribing a unified centred subjectivity to both India and Enlightenment, Verma subsumes competing and often vastly different subjectivities into a monolithic collective.

However, it is useful to think of Verma's otherwise astute observation as indelibly marked by his postcolonial desire for identity and collectivity (During 1995: 125). Writing in the wake of disenchantment with the political machinery, where the immediate past could evoke only disillusionment and distortions of nationalism, Verma's recourse is to seek out a possibility in a past that is not sullied by coercion of ideas and intellect.³ Entrenched in his criticism of European modernity is the anti-historical and anti-modern critique of the nucleus of colonial violence—the violence of ideas perpetrated against indigenous idioms and institutions of thoughts. This epistemic violence is as pervasively constitutive of the historical landscape of the post-independent nation-state as it was of the colonized space.⁴ Verma's suggestion that Enlightenment could have had a very different reception had it not been manipulated and disseminated through a primarily coercive colonial agency challenges the structures of identification that inform the inception of a modern nation-state.

Reading Verma's conceptualization of historical modernity from the vantage point of a sensibility that is constantly torn between avowal and forfeiture of the claims of historical identity then becomes an exercise in 'unraveling the necessary entanglement of history' (Chakravarty 2000:43).

Western 'history' and Indian *itihaas*

Verma has written extensively on 'history' and *itihaas*. He states his conceptualization in very lucid terms and it is worthwhile pausing and reading him carefully here:

What we call 'history' is like an unwritten novel, whose every event is taking human beings towards a predetermined destiny... On the other hand, the Indian perspective on '*itihaas*' is a pre-written text, where nothing is new and human beings repeat themselves in every event (*Itihaas*:18).

In Verma's terms, the difference in the two conceptualizations of history is the location of the centrality of human agency in historical discourse. The scheme of this binary division between European and Indian consciousness of time remains firmly entrenched in modernity itself.

The history that Verma calls 'European' is the (auto)biography of the tragic 'protagonist' of European novels, perpetually struggling between predestination and freewill and therefore predetermined, as necessitated by the categorical conditions of modern historiography. Central to the discourse of Western history is the construction of the causal self. Like the literary novel, the differentially arrogated but singularized agency writes itself into history and characterizes its formal architecture. History is both the act of writing the self and the form in which selfhood evolves. It attains cohesion and meaning through an integrated sense of self. By creating a correspondence between two forms of human articulation—empirical history and creatively ambiguous literature—Verma is able to unhinge the scientific, objective principles of Western historical rigour.

But more importantly, this characterization of European history as 'novel' also suggests the possibilities of postcolonial recuperation. Much like the novel's emergence as a genre can be attributed to colonial conditions, historical modernity also impinged on a similar discourse in colonized societies. The European novel,

introduced in 19th-century colonial India to ‘inspire assent and anglicization among colonial subjects...emerged as one of the most effective vehicles for voicing anticolonial and nationalist claims in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century’ (Joshi 2002: 17). As a genre that came into existence in the subcontinent only after British colonial intervention, the novel shares with modern historiography the creative possibilities of appropriations and refractions in a postcolonial society.

In this binary categorization, the Indian *itihaas* can only be read in opposition. Verma does, however, suggest that the rational conditionality of history cannot fully appreciate the Indian discourse on history. By its very nature, *itihaas* is a ‘text’ that has already been written and human agency can only have existential possibilities in it. This concept has been a defining feature of the Vedic-Hindu concept of time that was popularized by colonialist historiography in its judgment of Hinduism as a community ‘without history’ (Mittal and Thurs by 2004: 575). Bernard Cohn (1968: 56) points to the extraordinary emphasis that Orientalists attached to the ‘textual view of the society...[that] led to a picture of Indian society as being static, timeless and spaceless.’ The construction of India as unchanging, static and mystical facilitated the shift in agency onto the Europeans as Ronald Inden (1990: 401–46) suggests in his brilliant study on India.

More important than the particular sources of Orientalist historiography that Verma refers to is the fact that in doing so, he constitutes a strategic difference to the position of self in the two meta-narratives of history:

1. The detachable and fixable self that is primarily engaged in legitimizing agency, produced by empirical history in which ‘the intentional world of historical individuals, the world of active, spatial choices’ creates a self (Carter 1995: 376).
2. The elliptical and elusive self that is inadequate to determine agency for itself in face of inevitable time, endeavouring instead to document the subjective experiences of non-linear time.

Verma’s use of the two discrete terms ‘history’ and *itihaas* is uncharacteristic. In his essays, he often uses the Hindi term *itihaas* to connote indistinguishable overlaps in the present conceptualizations of Indian and European historiography. Etymologically, the Hindi word *itihaas* means the end of an event. Dividing the word at its syllabic break, ‘*iti*’ means ‘end’, and ‘*haas*’ means an ‘event’ (Bahari 2008: 57). (Alternatively, this Sanskrit term is construed to mean ‘that’s what happened’ or ‘so it was.’) Unlike the English term (derived from Greek ‘*historia*’, which means knowledge acquired by investigation), *itihaas* is not organized around a notion of human subjectivity. Human agency is just another aspect of historical continuity, and is not fundamental to its scalar flux.

Verma’s semantic rendering of that difference marks his understanding of the processes of history as lingual and therefore susceptible to what Hayden White calls the ‘storytelling’ techniques of modern historiography (White 1987: 1–25). While both White and Verma suggest the implicit slippage in the architecture of the historical self, Verma’s claim of the inevitability of historical forces detaches the structures of time from human agency. In Verma’s conceptualization, Indian *itihaas* is autonomous, a strategy of a-humanization that we see recurring in his essay.

The (a)human *smriti*

If modern history reveals its lacunae through selfhood articulated in processes of language and meaning, a postcolonial meta-narrative of recuperation also has to emerge from recognizing the locations of the habitations of selfhood that ‘begins and ends in language’ (Carter 1995: 376).

Verma suggests that time is pre-linguistic. But human cognition first captures time linguistically. Since language functions primarily by deferring meaning, memory too exists only by postponing reality, existing through allusions, myths and symbols. In Verma’s schema, language *is* memory (*Itihaas*: 9).

In the opening paragraph of his essay, Verma pinpoints to the crucial role of memory in bridging the gap between self and history:

Until an event is completely detached from us, it can never *become* memory. Without memory an event remains merely at the level of visceral experience. This purity of experience is chaotic. It does not have the *language* of memory that allows us to reproduce them in a sequence, which is called history (*Itihaas*: 9).

Emphasizing the constitutive location of *smriti* (memory) in the formation of historical consciousness, Verma suggests that to *become* a memory is to be able to enter the linguistic semiotics of human consciousness. More significantly, an experience can *become* memory only when it is completely detached from the human self or is a-humanized and autonomous.

In Verma’s formulations, ‘experience’ of time must be constructed as autonomous, embedded in memory and institutionalized by the social processes of history. Verma’s pre-historical ‘experience’ holds re-creative possibilities for postcolonial politics of remembering. To remember is to connect with the chaos of experiences and therefore to make oneself available to acts of ‘disjunctive representations’ (Bhabha 1995: 177). What we choose to remember or forget in historical formulations reveals our constituent subjectivities. The act of remembering as a political assertion of identity becomes doubly fraught when driven by machineries of hegemonic state control. Both the colonial and postcolonial institutions of history reiterate and legitimize narratives of historical adherence and conformity. History, in this schema, is merely an organization of the more fundamental connection between memory and experience onto a quantifiable scale, inscribed within the uniform tenets of normativity.

To address the question of Verma’s distinctive poetics of constituting memory as essential to human experience of time, we must interrogate the twin projects of nature and art that Verma seeks to identify as an infinite source of recuperative memory.

***Smriti* and nature**

Central to Verma’s exegesis of *smriti* are two meta-narratives that inscribe the pre-rational experiences of history: *prakriti* (nature) and *kalakriti* (art/artefact).⁵ Following the book’s schematic division of memory’s relationship with the two terms, we discuss *prakriti* first.

For Verma, nature is motionless and directionless time. It is outside human agency. In Verma’s fictional works, nature operates at an autonomous level, assuming

a character of its own. His first and much-acclaimed short story, *Parinde* (1959) deploys characters perched in-between different states of socialization. All of them are characterized by their indeterminate geographies that regulate their human functionality. While Verma's essays have constantly problematized modernity, the predominant operative symbols of human fragmentation and confusion in his fictional works—fog, clouds, streams, blind streets, dungeons, etc.—are not merely adjectives towards characterizations of a narrative. While they are nature's prescriptions for human inadequacy, they exist independent of human characterization.

In Verma's rhetorical movement in the second chapter of *Itihaas*, pure experience of time is nature, because the fractured modern self cannot grasp the absolute of nature. Quoting Walter Benjamin's celebrated essay on Paul Klee's painting, Verma suggests that our sense of progress is like Klee's painting, facing the past, buffeted by a storm but crawling towards a future.⁶

Benjamin's 'storm from Paradise' is Verma's primal force of nature, where change is the only constant. 'Death is enacted in every human being, but for every being it is her first time' (*Itihaas*: 18). Death is an unfamiliar experience for the subject but in nature there is nothing unnatural in dying or being born. The *parivartan* (transcendental changes) in history, like the laws of nature, is absolute. It is *smriti* that validates and links the processes of these changes over generations otherwise we would have no basis of *change* itself (*Itihaas*: 18). Posing a rhetorical question, Verma asks, 'Can we construct human destiny by disengaging from the time-consciousness (*kaal-chetna*) of this earth?' (*Itihaas*: 17).

The use of the word *kaal* to denote time-consciousness is significant. *Kaal* means both death and time in Hindi, in contrast to *samay*, which carries the resonance of clock-time (Bahari 2008: 105). '*Kaal-chetna*' constructed as fundamental to human existence, is beyond our scope for two reasons—firstly, because it is ever dynamic and mutable and secondly because it challenges the notions that the self-possesses a beginning and an end.

Nature's time is impossible to capture in narratives of progressive historiography and therefore remains outside the axes of chronology and space. Verma's projection of nature as both timeless and a-spatial contests the directionality and relativity of time proposed by the Leibnizian foundations of the Enlightenment (www.iep.utm.edu). *Smriti* is the connection between the constant mutation of nature-time and the inherent crystallization of clock-time.

By projecting nature-time as beyond the scope of human agency, Verma situates history as fundamentally scalar. But then, how do we make sense of human-time? The strategy of a-humanization helps Verma to constantly interrogate his own position by liberating his subjectivity from the possibilities of a monolithic interpretation. 'Is human nature also not a part of Nature?' (*Itihaas*: 26), asks Verma suggesting unpredictable psychological depths to human interiority. Further, Verma's awareness of his own complex subjectivity is rare in a genre that encourages a coherent and stable 'I'—empirical historiography assumes an invisible, stable narrator—even if, as is the case with many of Verma's contemporaries, that identity itself is hybrid. The

level of scrutiny to which he is willing to subject his position sets him apart as an unrelenting and unique thinker and also allows him to position art as a bridge between the divergence of nature-time and human-time.

Myths, according to Verma are the repositories and chronicles of human participation and sustenance in nature. Myths are collective and shared associations with nature-time. To see myths only as stories, fantastical and unreal, marks the split of human self into an inner and outer self-according to Verma. The turn to myths, to narrative structures that cannot be entirely comprehended is a crucial movement in the essay towards recognizing the essentially polyvalent claims of human subjectivity that are manifested in *kalakriti* (art).

***Smriti* and art**

While the focus of this essay is an exploration of what Verma broadly calls 'historical consciousness and human time', it is the third and final chapter that contains the most detailed and powerful exposition on different states of psychological and creative experiences of time. This is the heart of Verma's argument in *Itihaas*: that the human a-perception of time is inadequately addressed by clock-time or progressive history, and how the recognition of differential locations of the experience of time can be a source of both creative and psychological coherence.

To stress the universalism of mythic notions and the crucial role they play in the construction of human-time, Verma quotes both the *Iliad* and *The Mahabharata*, two epics considered representative of two ancient civilizations. This turn to literary sources reflects Verma's conviction that time in literature as a work of art is time in spatial experience, 'private, personal, subjective, psychological time' (*Itihaas*: 25).

Verma describes Hector's flight from the site of the Trojan war as: the helpless, unprotected Hector, running towards the square of his city, suddenly finds himself surrounded by the memory of the peaceful days when the beautiful women of Troy would come to that square to wash themselves. Verma contrasts Hector's reverie with the example of Arjun's 16-year-old son, Abhimanyu. Abhimanyu unsuccessfully challenges the mysterious military formation (*chakravyuh*) of the Kauravas and turns the battle decisively in the Pandavas' favour, but at the cost of his own life. Abhimanyu heard about this battle formation from his father while in his mother's womb, though divine intervention by Lord Krishna rendered the telling incomplete and precluded total victory. This subconscious memory is activated when he enters the battlefield and allows him to wage a heroic though fatal war against the might of the iconic Kaurava warriors. (*Itihaas*: 25).

What is important to identify from both these examples is the way Verma differentiates between clock-time and *smriti*. As his examples demonstrate, the experience of memory is located first and foremost in splitting the self into a present and a past-in-present. This requires in Verma's aesthetics both a chronological as well as a spatial rendering of the self in time. The presence of *smriti*, Verma argues, *necessitates* both the perceiving self and the experience of memory itself.

To identify the constitution of *smriti* to notions of selfhood is to underscore the specific charge of postcolonial re-ordering of the concept of memory. Dennis

Walder's typology of postcolonial nostalgia as 'reflective' or 'restorative' proves useful here in interrogating the politics of representation of experience and memory.

Walder (2011: 11) suggests:

restorative nostalgia focuses on *nostos*, and tries in spite of history to reconstruct the lost home,...whereas reflective nostalgia thrives on *algia*, the longing itself, but wistfully, ironically, desperately.

Walder qualifies these kinds of nostalgia as tendencies rather than absolute types; but they nevertheless provide a useful template for thinking about the kind of politics we can uncover from reading the two examples.

The *smriti* Verma evokes is drawn from both restorative and reflective impulses of memory in the present, projecting his own location as a postcolonial writer. In Hector's division of self into a past and a past-present, we can deduce the restorative functions of memory—Walder's reconstructions of a lost home. In Abhimanyu's case, memory is not emphasized as restorative, but rather functions to highlight its own incompleteness and fragility in the face of the inherent insecurity of the present. Had the wisdom Abhimanyu received in his womb not been partial, he could have saved his life from an avoidable sacrifice and perhaps overturned the course of the epic battle.

The acknowledgement of a fragmentary and disconnected past also recognizes an equally unstable and disjointed present. *Smriti* serves to regulate our associations with the present by constantly challenging the stability of our past. By projecting itself as nurturing and cohering, as elusive and fragmentary, and arbitrary and contingent, *smriti* creates a 'potential for self-reflexivity or irony appropriate for former colonial or diasporic subjects' (Walder 2011: 16). Further, it is the random surfacing of *smriti*, its involuntary demotic recall that disturbs and over-rides any human desire to formulate an empirical coherence to the ways in which postcolonial subjectivities remember or forget.

The rupturing *smriti* is also analogous to the creative implosion of a contiguous self. The postcolonial subject not only seeks a return to its past, a past that the colonial and nationalist conditions impose on it, but also actively engages in recognizing the indeterminacy and inadequacy of this return.

In Verma's schema, only art can reproduce the contingency and temporality of memory. Only art, according to Verma, does not seek to reproduce man in any totalitarian sense. This differentiates it from all ideological frameworks, including religions and cultures, which derive their validation from the centrality and primacy of a coherent human agency. Borrowing Simone Weil's conception of 'metaxu',⁷ which has a direct influence on *Itihaas*, Verma's conceptualization of art eschews absolute suppositions by foregrounding the inherent separation of art from the artist.

But is not this separation and liminality of art and nature also equally modernist in its claims? Verma is not denying his own participation in the project of modernity but he struggles to position a different conditionality of modernity and modern history—one that is not complicit in constructing a universal reference of *self* but rather exists as Walter Benjamin suggests, '[in] multiplicity and not singularity of the essence, as a harmony and a unity of truth' (plato.stanford.edu). In the introduction to his first anthology of essays, *Shabd aur Smriti* (1975), Verma says:

[M]odernity has become a convenient vehicle for protecting ourselves in...attractive labels—progress, historical development, demands of the time, masses, common man...This modernity is different from the one that Apollinaire had handed us down where he had called for the discovery of truth on the unknown limits of words (*Smriti*: 9–10).

It is not incidental that Verma chooses to refer to Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918). The latter's 1914 poem 'Le Musicien de Saint-Merry' marks not only a decisive moment in its author's career but also inaugurates an important motif in Western art and literature. The faceless man in a mysterious entourage for the first time came to symbolize human condition⁸. In evoking Apollinaire, Verma clearly rejects a modernity that is codified and formulated through specific sets of 'orthodox, superstitious fashions and formulas' (*Smriti*: 9). He seems to be advocating a 'faceless modernity', crafted in the not-quite-image of Apollinaire's 'faceless man'.

The strategy for understanding experiences of both art and nature remains similar in that both of them presage a split in the human self into an 'inner' self that responds to the anarchy of memory and an 'external' self that is coded through rationality. Further, in this splitting of self, art and nature are liberated from rational agencies of interpretation. But unlike nature, art and aesthetic experiences are *human*.

Verma does not say that the putative modern history is less significant, but the collective desires and articulations to belong and identify require the operation of *human* categories of historical thought. Acknowledging the micro-movements of *smriti* in a postcolonial belonging does not mean a mere filiative recalling of the past.⁸ It means adopting new perspectives, owning painful complicities and transgressions of the past and choosing to belong to the collective trauma of the past. In other words an *affiliative* recognition that makes the choices and decisions of the present meaningful.

History and memory: The postcolonial recuperation

Although it is difficult to locate in Verma's thesis a firm resolution to the challenges of European modern history, I wish to propose in conclusion that his struggle to revise and pose an immanent spatiality for time through the concept of *smriti*—and his constant interrogation of his own location—leaves us with many useful questions that point to the inherent failure of postcolonial recuperative strategies.

Does Verma's rhetorical positioning of Western history and its Indian counterpart not project a deeper conflict, symptomatic of postcolonial modernity in its inability to de-centre the notion of epistemic human agency as the only way of assuming subjectivity? Does not 'memory' also create its own histories, amnesias of institutionalization and grand narratives that perpetuate denial of languages and identities, institutions and collectivities? Is not *smriti* also a way of thinking about time, just as historical modernity is?

The failure to resolve these questions does not diminish the value that such challenges pose to the rhetoric of value judgments and protocols of knowledge systems, European or Indian. Verma's account of European historiography and Indian *itihaas* contests the often rigid and brutal systems of exclusion and inclusion that fail to recognize the divergent and complex notions of space and time in decolonized 'locales' that structure the multiplicity of communitarian forms.

Memory is spectral, fundamentally participatory and therefore creative. Cohering a relationship between creative articulations, memory and history, Verma reconstructs a filiative model of reading history, one that can potentially redress and transform the essential belatedness of the postcolonial self.

End-notes

All translations of Nirmal Verma's texts—*Itihaas*, *Smriti aur Akanksha* and *Shabd aur Smriti* are mine, except those in the volume *India and Europe*.

¹See Indranath Madan (1966), Lakshmisagar Varshneya (1970) and more recently Jayadeva (1993) on Verma's literary and critical heritage in Hindi.

²While identifying decolonization as singular, I am aware that decolonization cannot be codified in specific historiographies and geographies, and that it is plural and diverse in its location and forms, reproduced in multiple epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies.

³Emma Tarlo's *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi* is a fascinating analysis of the imposition of Emergency in 1975 and its impact.

⁴Drawing largely from Dipesh Chakravarty's notion of 'repression and violence' (*Artifice* 44), I contend that postcolonial violence is played out in a repertoire of communitarian gestures and social hierarchies that function to legitimize communitarian ideologies (see Chakravarty's *Artifice of History* for the several implications of the relationship between violence and history).

⁵In both the Hindi terms, the accent is on the creative and assimilative powers of the two meta-narratives of nature and art. The two prefixes 'pra' and 'kala' mean 'beyond' and 'art' respectively. 'Kriti', is 'creation'. This etymology hints at the complex placement of human agency in the two terms in Hindu philosophy.

⁶For a more complete account of the significance of Walter Benjamin's observations on Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940), see Pericles Lewis's *Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (2007).

⁷Simone Weil's 'metaxu' is a term that she borrowed from Plato and is something that both separates and connects. For further discussion of this, see Christine Howe's *Cultivating Hope*.

⁸Closely linked to modern history, and modern sensibility, 'the faceless man' was adopted by European writers and artists as a symbol of 20th century existence. Later, the Figurative School of Indian abstract painters was highly influenced by Apollinaire's poem. Ram Kumar (b.1924), Verma's elder brother and a lifetime associate, has been one of the leading painters from this school, whose Varanasi paintings have been seen to appropriate Apollinaire's 'the faceless man'.

⁹I borrow the terms filiative and affiliative from Edward Said. By filiative ties, I mean unquestioned assumptions about connections with traditions and nationhood. Affiliation denotes the element of conscious choice and agency that grants a perception of authenticity and authority to acts of representing history as an objective model of knowledge formation in postcolonial societies.

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