

## **ROLE OF VIOLENCE IN *THE IMPRESSIONIST* BY HARI KUNZRU**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research paper has taken up the debut novel of Hari Kunzru entitled *The Impressionist* for examining the effect of violence on an individual. It analyses how at a physical and psychological level a personality is forced to change and become violent or deviant. The protagonist in the present novel is the symbol of a youth who is double jeopardized by his family and society on account of his identity. Since he is a mixed race, an Anglo-Indian, he is treated with physical, verbal and psychological violence. The outcome of the detailed analysis of the relation between protagonist and violence in the present novel, is that violence plays a great role in mutilating the personality.

**Key Words:** Violence, Hari Kunzru, Anglo-Indian, Psychological Violence, social apathy.

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Examining violence in literature is a complex process for it includes individual as well as social domain. Since violence cannot exist without the perpetrator and the victim it becomes a study of not only individual human behaviour but social behaviour as well. Generally it is believed that in order to control violence or end it, violence is not needed and it can be controlled by the practice of non-violence. But the fact is that it applies only on the physical and individual violence. Violence includes those acts that result from a power relationship, including threats and intimidation, neglect or acts of omission, in addition to more obvious violent acts. Violence has a broad range of outcomes – including psychological harm, deprivation and mal-development. Violence does not necessarily result in injury or death, but

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nonetheless poses a substantial burden on individuals, families and communities. In such cases of non-apparent violence we must find some other kind of solution. Referring to the model of Van Soest and Bryant (1995) we can describe violence as best understood on three levels: individual, institutional and structural-cultural. While individual violence is a person-to-person conflict, we can quote from an article by Melissa B. Schieble on the “Violence on Literature” that, “Institutional and structural-cultural violence are layers of harm that are less easily noted and lurk beneath the surface as motivators for individual violence... Institutional forms of violence are ideological policies and practices that exhibit forms of social control... structural-cultural violence is more complex to identify because it is perceived as normal and natural.”

In the present research paper the debut novel of Hari Kunzru *The Impressionist* published in April 2002, has been taken up for study. Hari Mohan Nath Kunzru, born in 1969 in London to a Kashmiri Pandit father and a British Anglican Christian mother, grew up in Essex. He has received various literary awards for his works. He burst onto the literary scene with his ambitious debut novel *The Impressionist*, published in April 2002. It is a picaresque tale of an Anglo-Indian boy constantly swapping identities, forced its way onto a string of shortlists for literary awards and brought the writer Somerset Maugham Award in 2003. Set during the first part of the 20th century and moving from India to England to Africa *The Impressionist* uses British imperialism to explore issues of identity and vice versa. The whole chain of incidents in the novel is formed directly or indirectly by some act of violence either physical or psychological which leads to the doom of the protagonist.

The novel is a deep study of the life of an Anglo-Indian who has to face some kind of violence whether it is physical or verbal in his life. The novel opens on a violent note presented by the Nature’s fury as stormy atmosphere in which the mother of the protagonist meets an Irish forest officer and has some intimate time with him, who becomes the biological father of the Protagonist. But the circuitous circumstances of the birth of Pran Nath Razdan, the protagonist, are kept a secret until he attempts to violate a girl. The violence or the inclination towards violence is not sudden in Pran Nath because if we see his family history we find that he has inherited it from his self-willed mother. This attempt of violence on the protagonist’s part costs his inheritance and his family. Here the way the protagonist is treated can be counted under child maltreatment because he is only fifteen years old. Child maltreatment is the abuse and neglect that occurs to children under 18 years of age. It includes all types of physical and/or

emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power. Consequences of child maltreatment include impaired lifelong physical and mental health, and social and occupational functioning. Then the whole course of his life is changed. The very whiteness that used to be a source of pride to the whole Razdan family becomes a shame because his complexion,

*"...is not brown, or even wheaten colored, but white. Pran Nath's skin is a source of pride to everyone. Its whiteness is... a perfect milky hue, like that of the marble the craftsmen chip into ornate screens down by the Tajganj. Kashmiris come from the mountains and are always fair, but Pran Nath's color is exceptional. It is proof, cluck the aunties, of the family's superior blood. Blood is important" (Kunzru 16).*

His life in the captivity of Ma-ji and Balraj is a long tail of physical violence and torture which gives a glimpse of the inner life of the flesh business. This torture leads the protagonist to believe that he has lost all self respect and he has no identity as well.

And in the very next part we find him struggling in a burka and getting a new identity of Rukhsana. At Fatehpur the chief hijra khwaja-sara interrogates him,

*"Now" lisps the khwaja-sara, threateningly. "Who are you?"*

*"I am Pran Nath—" begins Pran, but is brought short by a slap to the face."*

*"No!" spits the khwaja-sara. "Try again. Who are you?"*

*"I—" Another slap. "No! Again!"*

This goes on until Pran (who has tried answering "Please," "Stop hitting me," and even "Rukhsana") mutters, "Nothing."

*"Good. Now, who am I?"*

*"You are the khwaja-sara."*

*"The impertinence!" Another slap.*

*“I don’t know! I don’t know!”*

*“Good. Well done.”*

*“...You are Rukhsana, which is to say that you are nothing. You have been brought here to perform a service for the state of Fatehpur, and you will do your duty without complaining” (Kunzru 66-7).*

It is the threat of the Khwaja-sara that makes him behave like a girl and accept the identity of a girl and later the identity of the boy of a gay officer. But all this leaves a deep mark on his psychology, that of fear, the fear of losing his life at the hands of some selfish politicized people working for their benefit without any concern for the boy. Except the Major Privett-Clamp no one gives him any word of compassion. And when he reaches Amritsar just after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre he saves himself somehow and is quite terrified by the tense atmosphere there. Then we find him in a completely different world in Bombay (now Mumbai) working for a Missionary couple with a completely new name Chandra alias Robert. But here his life has not become free from the impression of the flesh business which was responsible for his coming to Bombay. Here he tries to show the missionary Macfarlane couple that he is a very smart and obedient boy but secretly he has another personality and identity with the name of Pretty Bobby in the red light area of the locality. He runs errands in return of money for the women working there and has a very good reputation there. It seems that he has learnt from the ups and downs of his life the hard fact of the survival of the fittest. Now he is ready to compromise anything to get what he wants. He does not care even for the old couple who treat him just like their son and during the riots leaves them alone. Then he does not bother to save the drunken young man who is unable to defend himself in the riots, instead he runs away. Now Bobby has become so hardened by the rogue like survival that he does not hesitate even to impersonate the young man Bridgeman.

In the persona of Bridgeman it seems that now he would be stable and lead a normal life but the entry of an Anglo-Indian girl turns the course of his life, she rejects him with an insult,

*“Run away, little boy,” she says. “Go on. Piss off and don’t come back. If I see you again, here or anywhere, I’ll tell them about you. They’ll put you in prison. No one likes niggers who play at being white men” (Kunzru 213).*

This rejection and psychological violence leads him to Astarte a spoilt modern child who lives in a fantasy world and lures him. Bridgeman faces a lot of problems in England regarding the climate and the culture. He even maintains a notebook to note everything that has to be learnt to become a perfect Englishman. All this just because he has never been accepted by the society for what he is; in India when he believes that he is a Kashmiri Pandit, he is expelled from his own home then when he goes to find a place among his so called community people he is beaten for speaking the truth. Then he is made to believe that he has no identity and no existence in the world in terms of recognition. Then when he gets to be accepted in the Oxford University, he finds that he is not used to the recognition. He starts to enjoy his situation of non-recognition and in order to fill the gap of identity in his life he starts impersonating. In London he gets to fulfil his dream but one more social bias comes before him. He has to appease the father of the girl he is interested in. But the same girl chooses someone more truthful over him for the man she chooses is better than Bridgeman (Pran Nath) because he has a stable self-identity. This breaks not only his heart but also his self-image of a perfect impersonator. This seems to him a kind of violence of natural order of partner selection. He thinks that she has chosen a black man over him which is unnatural but he forgets that she has chosen a pure blood over a mixed one although unknowingly. She has chosen primitive culture over the sophisticated one. But this rudeness proves a death blow to his self-image and he is not ready to accept it. This starts the down fall of his personality internally.

After this sudden shock he goes to the Fotse land with Astarte's father but now his aim is not to impress him for his daughter but to find something substantial to ground himself on and find his self respect. In the Fotse land he is caught by the natives. Here there is a detailed description how he is treated brutally by them. The natives exercise a violent ritual but they spare his life. This experience tells him that violence has a role in his existence. His team members think that he has been killed by the natives for nobody finds his body for a long time. But in the end we find that the protagonist is alive and is leading an anonymous life without any effort at impersonating.

This makes us think as to why a naughty and active boy turns into an anonymous man loitering in desert. The circumstances of his life are responsible for this. The violence of his family members leaves him helpless which leads to his believing in his survival instincts. After having faced so much violence at the hands of his family and the society and even politics we

cannot expect him to become a noble gentleman. Violence not only affects physically it also affects psychologically. And the psychiatrists believe that the psychological effects cannot be erased by changing only physical conditions. The psychological effects remain life-long and in some cases they affect the quality of life too. Here in the case of the protagonist of this novel we can say that he has learned the lesson of life the hard way so he could not get time or circumstances to develop a conscience for emotional responsibility. He behaves as per requirements of his survival. While no one around him is showing any responsibility for him then he also cannot be blamed for being selfish. His own mother made him the victim of her selfishness. Then his relatives shoo him away from his father's property and deny him his social rights.

The novel can be analysed from the angle of the possibility of a different scenario in which when the boy was raised in the family of a Brahmin as a Brahmin for fifteen years then if he were accepted in the family even after the revelation of his true parentage what would have been the circumstances. In that case he would have been saved from the violence that he has to face and we can expect that he might have developed into a completely different personality. He might have been punished for his misbehaviour but there is no logic in punishing him for the mistake he has not done. It is not his mistake that he is an Anglo-Indian or a mixed race. This biased behaviour of society towards an innocent boy is questionable.

Further we find that this one incident proves so fatal for his future that he turns into an impersonating rogue without any concern for morals. What would he do with morals if he is not allowed even to live with the dignity of a human being? The morals come quite behind the survival. He has to reinvent himself again and again in order to cope with the inhuman violent conditions he is kept in. This novel is a living example of how violence affects the children and how society and the individual have to pay for such mistakes. Further we can say that sometimes mob violence also helps to promote wrong practices and wrong elements to take advantage of the situation. For example in the present novel the communal riots force Bobby to leave Bombay which unfolds a new world of opportunities before him but on the other hand he has robbed a young man from his life, inheritance and even a funeral.

Thus it is reflected that the pre-Independence era social struggle and violence also have a very great role in the development of his character. The freedom fighters collecting at the



house of Mrs. Macfarlane do not like his English dress up and white look. Although Mrs. Macfarlane calls him by the name of Chandra yet he is not happy with his Indian identity because he is unable to cope with the situation of being an Indian without looking like an Indian. And since he looks like a European he prefers to mix up with the Europeans and finally goes to England. The social apathy plays a very important role in the development of his character.

So we can conclude that this novel reflects how violence plays with the lives of young men and even in some cases completely changes their life. This is a fictitious story but we can understand that the circumstances delineated in this novel are not far from reality. The novelist has successfully put forward what he wanted to convey through this novel. Although the novel is basically a saga of the life of an Anglo-Indian in the pre-Independence era yet it faithfully conveys the theme of violence and its effects too.

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