

RED GLASS BANGLES
A NOVELLA

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ABSTRACT

Red Glass Bangles is a novella set in Toronto in the early seventies. A Sikh Punjabi bride named Sukhi finds herself in a whirlwind of adapting to life in Canada. Her inherited memory of the traumatic past, specifically of the violence against women during the India-Pakistan Partition in 1947, creates a psychological lens for her existential survival. In the prologue we learn about the communal violence in Katua, a village in Punjab, where dozens of women, children and men, including Sukhi's grandparents and aunt, were murdered during Partition. The story unfolds in Sukhi's voice as she struggles to balance her traditional marriage and aspirations of independence in Canada with her longing for family and friends back home. Sukhi's mental state deteriorates. Eventually she loses her grip on reality and enters her own world, in which her art and imagination unfold the trauma of her past.

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The novella *Red Glass Bangles* concerns an aspect of history relevant to a large segment of the Canadian population whose roots go back to the India-Pakistan Partition of 1947. Over 500,000 women were murdered and displaced in its wake and aftermath. This gendered violence is frequently attributed to the communal rifts between Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus. Over 80,000 women committed suicide, many of whom were prompted to take their own lives by their patriarchal family members in the name of family honour.

An extensive body of literature examines the trauma and the victimization of survivors. In the realm of fiction, *Train to Pakistan* by Kushwant Singh is a harrowing story of ethnic cleansing and communal suspicion which leads to the forced evacuation of Muslims of Mano Marja, a fictitious border village in Punjab. Tribal allegiances are put to the ultimate test when the Muslims of the village are asked to help bury the dead corpses of Hindus on the incoming train. *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal is about the displacement and migration of a middle-class Hindu family from Sialkot, Pakistan to Delhi, India. Two novels that proved particularly important to my research are *Clear Light of Day* by Anita Desai and *What the Body Remembers* by Shawna Singh Baldwin. Both novels explore issues of patriarchy and its effect on women and their agency. Desai's narrative concerns the separation of family, and memories of Partition. *What the Body Remembers* topicalizes violence towards women, largely as a result of the patriarchal culture, which itself is protected and guarded by men and women alike. Baldwin's story exposes the social expectations imposed upon women from early childhood. Her work is a central inspiration with respect to themes of patriarchy in my novella. While *What the Body Remembers* spans decades with many characters and several sub-plots, I opted for a single focus: to tell the story of a young bride's disintegration because of her father's violent past.

The novella form lent itself well to this singular focus. However, the novella presents its own challenges. In his essay, "Some Notes on The Novella," Ian McEwan discusses the challenges that a novella format imposes on the fiction writer, these being the duty of unity, the demands of economy, and a focused drive to the heart of the story. McEwan's emphasis on unity aside, *Red Glass Bangles* nevertheless required structural

segmenting to delineate the story's different time frames – specifically, 1947 (prologue), 1974 (the narrative's central time frame) and, finally, later in 1974 (the period of the epilogue) which corresponds closely to my own life in Canada as new immigrant.

In addition to drawing, to some extent, on personal experience, my research was significantly guided by travel to Amritsar. In the libraries of Guru Nanak Dev University, and Khalsa College, I scrutinized local and national daily newspapers of the day, now yellowed and tattered, and recorded all reported instances of rape, murder and revenge conspiracies. This situational research provided data about geography, dates and distances as well as the landscape of a border village. In addition, visits to villages around Amritsar -- specifically ones impacted by the violence toward imposition of a border -- were very instructive for historical nuance in describing a village where Sukhi's grandparents lived before the partition. Walking through the border village of Atari was akin to walking in a ghost village. Apart from the electric poles and cable wires that run haphazardly between houses and streets, the village is the dark ghost of its previous self. Abandoned ruins of temples and mosques still stand across the narrow lanes behind the brick walls. Curiosity and intuition led my walks during which I gathered sensory data that would become, in the novella, a ghostly aura that resonated increasingly with my protagonist's trauma and psychological deterioration. The story, in turn, engaged with a sense of ghostly presences.

Although Sukhi, the protagonist, moves to Toronto, her past intrudes in the form of fragmented memories, into the present, and takes over all aspects of her present-day life: marriage, work, social circles. Being haunted by the past undermines Sukhi's ability to navigate her life in her home. Memories flooding in on Sukhi cause her to withdraw into her own troubled psyche; thus, interiority became a key narrative device in *Red Glass Bangles*. For this aspect of the novella I owe a debt of gratitude to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and its representation of mental disintegration through visual stimuli. Similar visual elements in *Red Glass Bangles* – such as the bangles themselves, along with clothing and material entities – form parts of re-enactment of past trauma. My use of dreamlike sequences to re-enact some scenes of Partition violence was inspired by Tom McCarthy's novel *Remainder*, which uses fragmented time to re-enact an accident involving the protagonist. Art, for Sukhi,

expresses a sense of fragmentation and her interior state; ultimately, art provides a release and a way forward, towards which my novella gestures.

The open-endedness of *Red Glass Bangles* signals my continued anxiety about the far-reaching impacts of normalising authoritarian patriarchy; in the end it is about power, which is hard to wrestle away from those in power. *Red Glass Bangles* is an experiment in how a fictional narrative carries forward this critical dialogue.

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