

Performing the «miasma» of Indian Partition. Terror and romance in Howard Brenton's *Drawing the Line*

Elena Spandri

Abstract: Andato in scena all'Hampstead Theatre nel dicembre 2013 con la regia di Howard Davies, *Drawing the Line* racconta la drammatica vicenda della partizione del subcontinente indiano nei due stati separati di India e Pakistan nel 1947 a opera del governo coloniale. Apprezzato autore di drammi storici, Brenton si concentra sulla figura di Cyril Radcliffe, il giudice inviato in India dal primo ministro britannico per tracciare confini politici e culturali in un territorio geograficamente e storicamente unito, che l'atto della Partizione trasformerà in un vero e proprio teatro di guerra. Il contributo analizza l'uso del dramma storico contemporaneo come spazio di denuncia della violenza dell'impero britannico e di demistificazione di vecchi e nuovi orientismi.

I was struck with wonder that there had really been a time, not so long ago, when people, sensible people, of good intentions, had thought that all the maps were the same, that there was a special enchantment in lines. They had drawn their borders, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their border upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the ancient Gondwanaland.

Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*

1. A terrible what-if of history

Unbiased at least he was when he arrived on his mission,
Having never set eyes on this land he was called to partition
Between two people fanatically at odds,
With their different diets and incompatible gods.
'Time', they had briefed him in London, 'It's short'. It's too late

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Referee List (DOI 10.36253/fup_referee_list)

Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup_best_practice)

Elena Spandri, *Performing the «miasma» of Indian Partition. Terror and romance in Howard Brenton's Drawing the Line*, © Author(s), CC BY-SA, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0278-7.10, in Paola Bellomi, Carla Francellini, Maria Beatrice Lenzi, Ada Milani, Niccolò Scaffai (edited by), *La violenza nel teatro contemporaneo. Lingue e linguaggi a confronto*, pp. 115-129, 2023, published by Firenze University Press and USiena PRESS, ISBN 979-12-215-0278-7, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0278-7

For mutual reconciliation or rational debate:
 The only solution now lies in separation.
 The Viceroy thinks, as you will see from his letter,
 That the less you are seen in the company the better,
 So we've arranged to provide with other accommodation.
 We can give you four judges, two Moslem and two Hindu,
 To consult with, but the final decision must rest with you'.

Shut up in a lonely mansion, with police night and day
 Patrolling the garden to keep assassins away,
 He got down to work, to the task of settling the fate
 Of millions. The maps at his disposal were out of date
 And the Census Returns almost certainly incorrect,
 But there was no time to check them, no times to inspect
 Contested areas. The weather was frightfully hot,
 And a bout of dysentery kept him constantly on the trot,
 But in seven weeks it was done, the frontiers decided,
 A continent for better or worse divided.

The next day he sailed for England, where he quickly forgot
 The case, as a good lawyer must. Return he would not,
 Afraid, as he told his Club, that he might get shot¹.

Auden's 1966 poem on Partition provides a fruitful point of entry into the way the division of the Indian subcontinent into the two separate nation-states of India and Pakistan that accompanied decolonization has been (or may be) perceived from a Western cosmopolitan perspective. The poem focuses on Cyril Radcliffe, the British judge who was catapulted from London to Delhi to demarcate the territorial border between the two nations, in July 1947, and captures both the sense of urgency and the sloppiness of the operation that legitimized what Stanley Wolpert has aptly termed Britain's «shameful flight» from India immediately after independence². Historical accuracy notwithstanding, the poem reiterates a recurrent colonial rhetoric that essentializes India and portrays it as a site of religious fanaticism, unbridgeable gulphs between Hindu and Muslim communities, and ingrained civilizational conflicts («Between two people fanatically at odds, / With their different diets and incompatible gods»). At the same time, drawing attention to an anti-heroic imperial functionary crushed by anxiety and diarrhea in the face of the huge responsibility fallen on him («the task of settling / the fate of millions»), the poem ostensibly advocates an anticolonial agenda attuned to a world in which decolonization was still an incomplete project.

¹ W. H. Auden, *Partition* (1966), in Id., *City Without Walls*, Faber & Faber, London 1969, pp. 86-87.

² S. Wolpert, *Shameful Flight. The Last Years of the British Empire in India*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006.

In 2013 prominent British playwright Howard Brenton addressed the topic of Partition in similar terms in *Drawing the Line*, a two-part vibrant play directed by Howard Davies and first performed at London Hampstead Theatre on 3 December. Despite the gloomy aura attached to the historical events dramatized on stage, the director opted for a colorful and lush production, reminiscent of India's dazzling exotic atmosphere, which did not disdain orientalist touches and accounted for the play's successful reception³. The essay situates *Drawing the Line* in the context of Brenton's longstanding engagement with historical theatre and reflects upon the aesthetic and political implications of the marginal role assigned to violence in the drama. It argues that the play performs a postcolonial discourse on South-Asian history, in which cosmopolitan notions of Britishness, Anglo-Indian relations, and colonial rule are interrogated through an ambiguous dramatic irony that, on the one hand, deplors British ineptitude in handling the Partition process and, on the other hand, represents Partition as a colossal tangle of public and private complicities which mitigates the Raj's responsibilities and tacitly subscribes to a consolatory determinism. Indeed, the play depicts Cyril Radcliffe as «an honorable man» and extensively dwells on the *liaison* between the soon-to-be India Prime Minister Jawaharval Nehru and Viceroy Mountbatten's wife Edwina, offering it as an allegory of Britain's abiding commitment to India's national destiny as a free modern country. Conversely, it sidesteps Partition genocidal implications, thus shunning its most intractable humanitarian aspects and somewhat implying that violence and terror were the inevitable cost of Indian independence.

Brenton's hesitation is registered in the poignant definitions of Partition he offered when he was interviewed at the play *première*: «a miasma» and «a terrible what-if of history»⁴. His ambivalent and inquisitive take stems from two distinct sources, one aesthetic and one historiographical. The first is a Brechtian concept of epic theatre as dramatization of historical materials that inhibits identification and encourages audiences to supplement their own interpretation⁵. The second is responsiveness to an updated historical sensitivity that detects in the catastrophe of Partition shared political responsibilities and analyzes its

³ On the play's use of orientalist tropes see V. Cantoni, «An honourable man». *Stereotypes of Britishness facing the colonised 'other' in Howard Brenton's Drawing the Line*, in S. A. Brioschi, M. De Pietri (a cura di), *Visioni d'Oriente. Stereotipi, impressioni, rappresentazioni dall'antichità a oggi*, Pavia University Press, Pavia 2021.

⁴ UK Asian <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6IKgn5BxLM>> (02/2022)

⁵ On Brenton's political theatre see J. Reinelt, *Bertolt Brecht and Howard Brenton: The Common Task*, «Pacific Coast Philology», 20, 1/2, 1985, pp. 46-52, J. Bull, *New British Political Dramatists*, Macmillan, London 1991, J. Kelleher, *Theatre Politics*, Methuen Drama, London 2009, C. Megson, *Modern British Playwriting: The 1970s, Voices Documents New Interpretations*, Methuen Drama, London 2012, A. Feldman, *Dramas of the Past on the Twentieth-Century Stage: In History's Wings*, Routledge, New York and London 2013, R. Hillman, *(Re)constructing Political Theatre: Discursive and Practical Frameworks for Theatre as an Agent for Change*, «New Theatre Quarterly», 31, 4, November 2015, pp. 380-396, V. Cantoni, *New Playwriting at Shakespeare's Globe*, Methuen Drama, London 2017.

long-term planetary reverberations⁶. Many different theories and timeframes have been expounded with respect to the genealogy of Partition. According to the ‘two-nations theory’, the creation of Pakistan responded to an endogenous nationalist project and was the «inevitable crystallization of the desire of the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent to remain a distinctive community, separate from the Hindu population around them»⁷. Other theories are exogenous and blame the British empire for not relinquishing the ‘divide and rule’ policy and for «tearing the two communities apart, disrupting the bonds that had joined them together for centuries»⁸. Still, when it comes to outlining the main traits of Partition, there appears to be general agreement on considering mass violence as one of its structural components. Partition was preceded and followed by both state and communal violence which was not only the result of drawing arbitrary borders between previously united communities, but also a means to split them up. One of the paradoxes of Partition was that what had initially been celebrated as the accomplishment of an emancipatory trajectory from colonial subalternity to democratic self-government (the so called ‘Nehruvian narrative’) turned into a collective trauma that released an unbelievable – though not unpredictable – amount of violence, killed and displaced millions of people, and destabilized the Indian subcontinent throughout the subsequent decades. Additionally, the creation of Pakistan as a buffer state guarding British interests from the threat of the Soviet Union ended up perpetuating a condition of neo-coloniality that Partition was originally meant to overcome. Notably, the emergence of modernity is fraught with similar ironies: the coextensive diffusion of slavery practices and human rights culture in the eighteenth-century Atlantic hemisphere, as well as the genocide of Native Americans by the newly constituted American Republic, provide all-too familiar examples of modernity’s tragic incongruity. Considering Partition as an exception might therefore be misleading. Undoubtedly, Partition was a complex historical and political event that shaped South-Asian societies and their sense of identity and one which does not lend itself to simplifications. As Yasmin Khan argues, «the Partition story had – and still has – for some Indians and Pakistanis a redemptive and undeniably nationalistic element, despite all the tragedy». Yet, «it is just too complex to be reduced down to a harrowing foundational myth of national sacrifice and victimhood – for either Pakistan or India – although that is what it can easily become»⁹.

⁶ See in particular Y. Khan, *The Great Partition. The Making of India and Pakistan*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2007, D. Gilmartin, *The Historiography of India Partition*, «Journal of Asian Studies», 74, 1, 2015, pp. 23-41, S. Jana, *Decolonization and Genocide: Re-Examining Indian Partition, 1946-1947*, «Holocaust and Genocide Studies», 36, 3, Winter 2022, pp. 334-352.

⁷ R. Roy, *South-Asian Partition Fiction in English*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2010, p. 13.

⁸ Roy, *South-Asian Partition Fiction in English*, p. 14.

⁹ Kahn, *The Great Partition*, Preface to the New Edition (2017), p. xxiii.

Although controversies about its diverse and somewhat unfathomable causes have not lost momentum after more than seven decades, the awareness of its connections with religious fundamentalisms and nationalist ideologies and of its relevance for contemporary global scenarios is shared by both European and Asian historians. In the late 1970s, the rise of subaltern and oral history allowed to gradually integrate the nationalistic outlook with regional and gender-inflected perspectives that filled significant gaps, namely the crucial role played by local communities and non-state agents in the use of terror and in the victimization of women¹⁰. The most significant shift in the perception of Partition has been a new focus on its genocidal connotations, which questions exceptionalist theories and enables a more thorough understanding of the role played by mass violence and ethnic cleansing in decolonizing and postcolonial societies¹¹. Predictably, the new historical perspective does not lighten the British empire's direct responsibility for the bloodshed, the casualties and the mass migrations ignited by Partition. Rather, it shows how the waning power of the Raj in the 1920s and 1930s, and the hasty loosening of its administrative and military control in the Summer 1947, engendered the preconditions for genocidal violence. «Today», writes Rituparna Roy, «the legacy of 1947 looms larger than ever before on the subcontinent. Partition has actually proved to be a trauma from which the subcontinent has never fully recovered»¹².

2. *You must not sell human suffering short*

In her sweeping study of South-Asian Partition fiction in English, Ratuparna Roy reports that, according to many historians, literature represented Partition better than official histories of the subcontinent¹³. Unquestionably, Partition has been a pervasive topic in Indian writing in English from the 1950s and has gone through substantial stylistic transformations, ranging from shocking realistic reportage to more nuanced accounts mediated by modernist and postmodern narratives techniques. Over time, Partition fiction has consolidated into a distinguished novelistic tradition, whose scope is not only realistic representation of the political and humanitarian disaster entailed in the decision to separate India from Pakistan, but also the exploration of its traumatic impact on individuals and communities, as well as of people's imaginative investment in national mythologies. Two different and equally pathbreaking novels such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) beautifully testify to the vitality and metamorphic potential of the genre in the twentieth century.

¹⁰ See Jana, *Decolonization and Genocide*.

¹¹ Jana, *Decolonization and Genocide*, p. 334.

¹² Roy, *South-Asian Partition Fiction in English*, p. 18.

¹³ Roy, *South-Asian Partition Fiction in English*, p. 21. See also A. Tickell, «How Many Pakistans?» *Questions of Space and Identity in the Writing of Partition*, «Ariel: A Review of International English Literature», 32, 3, July 2001, pp. 155-179.

Roy discusses three time-honored tropes of Partition novels: family losses due to communal violence, trainloads of refugees and corpses and, finally, arbitrary borderlines that divide previously united communities. If the first two are situational tropes evoking on-ground scenarios of terror and suffering, the third trope lends itself more easily to metaphorical treatment. As Ghosh's characters must sadly experience, *borderlines* that materialize the imagined communities of nations¹⁴, and define people geopolitically, are also *shadow lines*, since they promise a sense of belonging which is at best illusory and at worst extremely dangerous¹⁵.

In light of this, what is the sense of dramatizing Partition's most contested act – namely, the hasty creation of an implausible and messy border between previously joined and culturally mixed communities dating back to 1947 – from an admittedly Western point of view, on a London stage in 2013? Is Brenton's choice of the topic a means to contrast national amnesia about the history of empire and take sides against a persisting «postimperial melancholia»?¹⁶ Does the play advocate «conviviality» (to borrow Gilroy's formula) or, antithetically, exhume colonial hostilities? Finally, given Brenton's habit of using Britain's past to question its present, how does *Drawing the Line* engage with British historical consciousness?

Any attempt to unravel this tangle of questions must necessarily begin from Brenton's account of the play's genesis. In a lively interview, the playwright provides a number of clues that help create a context for the drama and account for some dramaturgical choices¹⁷. In 2007 a Hollywood studio asked him to write a screenplay of Vikram Chandra's acclaimed novel *Sacred Games*. The writing went over five drafts and familiarized him with contemporary India. At that point, Brenton and his wife decided to visit Northern India for a couple of weeks and the tour took place right after the Mumbai 2008 terrorist attacks which devastated the city and caused further escalation of deep-seated tensions between India and Pakistan. By his own admission, in Mumbai Brenton's internalized imperialist way to look at a romantic and exotic India confronted the dark realities of a sub-continent still pestered by the legacy of Partition. He realized that «the border is well present in people's minds», inquired about how the procedure had been discharged in 1947, and discovered that the line had been materially traced on the map in five weeks by a British judge who knew nothing about cartography and even less about India, and who had probably been appointed to the task by Prime Minister Clement Atlee exactly on account of this:

¹⁴ On the connection between imagination and the rise of nationalism see B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London and New York 1986.

¹⁵ Roy argues that *The Shadow Lines* «questions this idea of a nationhood consolidated through the baptism of wars», *South-Asian Partition Fiction in English*, p. 120.

¹⁶ P. Gilroy, *After Empire. Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, Routledge, London and New York 2004.

¹⁷ J. Herman, *Playwright Howard Brenton on his new political play about Partition: Drawing the Line* (audio interview), *Theatre Voice*, 18 December 2013.

ANTONIA. On the spot in Downing Street! It's a great honour, Cyril.

RADCLIFFE. Yes.

ANTONIA. Tiny little problem, though. You know bugger all about India!

RADCLIFFE. Absolutely squelch!

They laugh.

Though, that's the reason why they've asked me. Atlee says the Government wants a fresh eye.

ANTONIA. Oh, Cyril, it will be a wonder. The beginning of an honourable end to Empire.

RADCLIFFE. It has to come. A new world.

ANTONIA. You are perfect for it.

RADCLIFFE. Well, I can try to offer a rational overview.

ANTONIA. To cut through.

RADCLIFFE. Gordian knot, yes. I'll be briefed intensely of course, the Viceroy's putting together a team for me¹⁸.

The play draws all sorts of irony from Radcliffe's weird combination of «innocence» and a quintessentially imperialist sense of entitlement that grants him the certainty he will be able to provide a rational perspective on the border issue only because he is a British judge: from Mountbatten's dismissive advice to «keep [his] virginity» and not «flirt with things Indian»¹⁹, to the judge's own posturing as a schoolboy who recites the list of the Raj's mischiefs in front of the leader of Indian National Congress, to show him his good intentions:

NEHRU. My dear Radcliffe, there have been adverse comments in the press about your, shall we say, innocence of India...

RADCLIFFE. ... Yes, of which I am all too painfully aware...

NEHRU. No, no, my dear fellow, the point is I welcome your impartiality.

RADCLIFFE. Thank you. And I assure you, I'm not wholly ignorant of the history of my country and yours. The massacre of Amritsar. The hangings at Ferozepur. The British Army's attacks on demonstrators during the salt-tax protest. These are blots on my country's reputation.

A silence.

NEHRU. Blots.

RADCLIFFE. Forgive me if I express myself inappropriately.

NEHRU. No, no, my dear fellow. The problem we all have is that, once blood is spilt, disputes between peoples, nations, religions become all but impossible to solve. But we have to act, somehow. It is a hard lesson: «Drive your cart and plough over the bones of the dead».

RADCLIFFE. William Blake²⁰.

¹⁸ H. Brenton, *Drawing the Line*, Nick Hern Books, London 2013, p. 9.

¹⁹ Brenton, *Drawing the Line*, p. 36.

²⁰ Brenton, *Drawing the Line*, p. 36.

While revising the most brutal episodes of British colonial rule in India and highlighting Indian politicians' impeccable British education for the spectators' sake, the dialogue unveils the deep ambiguity of Radcliffe's alleged 'innocence' (diplomatically rephrased by Nehru as impartiality), in that it shows how the judge's sympathetic indictment of colonial violence is grounded on anxieties about the morality of empire, rather than on political or humanitarian concerns about the effects of violence in the subcontinent. Where Nehru sees fratricidal conflicts and bloodshed past, present and future, Radcliffe sees «blots» on Britain's reputation as a great imperial nation. Here Brenton draws on a time-honored literary tradition of uncompromising civil servants who staunchly believe in Britain's civilizing mission («what is called the jolly old white man's burden»)²¹ and justify their lack of empathy by appealing to work ethics – from Conrad's absurd 'arlequins' who keep the machinery of empire going in the heart of African darkness, to Forster's and Orwell's Anglo-Indian imperial officers who pride themselves on spending their lives trying to mediate political and religious quarrels they don't understand:

CHRISTOPHER. There has to be a Muslim state...

RAO. How, by tearing the face of Mother India to bits?

RADCLIFFE. Stop this, stop this now. I have been sent to do a job, I will do it. This is a time for hard heads. I must be logical.

RAO. But surely not indifferent, sir...

RADCLIFFE. Yes, indifferent! I cannot become emotional, I cannot. Dead women, children I cannot. It. I must rest before the meeting with advisers. I mean, I must go mightily to the lavatory. So...²².

The mixture of pathos and bathos, epitomized by Radcliffe's attempt to assert his authority over the quarrelsome delegates of the Border Commission in the middle of a dysentery fit, has been in Brenton's agenda ever since the beginning of his theatrical career. He addresses the question in both the 1986 Preface to *Plays: 1* and in the 1989 Preface to *Plays: 2*. In the former, the playwright advocates «clashes of style» and «tragic-comical», or «comical-tragic» effects as «attempts to get the theatre to be more real»²³. In the latter, he resumes the topic with reference to the closest antecedent to *Drawing the Line* from a thematic point of view, that is *The Romans in Britain* (1980). The play has been read as a transparent anti-imperialist epic since it dramatizes the Roman conquest, taking «a rooted, popular myth from the British consciousness», and rewrites it in terms of a terrifying «culture shock» that annihilates the Celts²⁴. Additionally, in keeping with Brenton's notion of historical theatre, the play unfolds a direct parallel with Britain's colonial history by setting the second part in con-

²¹ Brenton, *Drawing the Line*, p. 71.

²² Brenton, *Drawing the Line*, p. 60.

²³ Brenton, Preface to *Plays: 1*, Methuen, London 1986, p. x.

²⁴ Brenton, Preface to *Plays: 1*, Methuen, London 1986, p. vii.

temporary Ireland. Yet, unlike *Drawing the Line*, *The Romans in Britain* stages a great amount of cruelty and violence and features a «perverse» dramatic shape, «with a first half that is violent, dynamic and tragic, while the second one is elegiac, still and flooded with a hysterical, light-hearted, comic spirit»²⁵. In the Preface, Brenton vindicates an anticonventional choice that, in all evidence, in 1980 destabilized received ideas about style homogeneity and explains that, though hard to dramatize, playwrights have the ethical obligation to represent cruelty on stage and never pretend it «is not as bad as it is»:

If you are not prepared to show humanity at its worst, why should you be believed when you show it at its best, in a play that attempts to do both in equal measure. You must not sell human suffering short²⁶.

Both plays interrogate the historical and cultural foundations of empires and expose their chief paradoxes, but the stylistic means by which they articulate their anti-imperialist critique greatly differ. *The Romans in Britain* offers on-stage cruelty which elicits uncompromising responses with respect to imperial violence and resonates with the ordeal of contemporary Ireland. *Drawing the Line* evokes bloodshed and carnage as an off-stage threatening scenario which haunts Radcliffe and all the Indian contenders (included Gandhi), but whose devastating impact is suspended and deflected onto the allegedly more urgent question of solving a «leadership crisis»²⁷. In Herman's interview, Brenton discusses his interest in leadership crises also in connection with other twenty-first century plays (in particular *Anne Boleyn* and *55 Days*) and maintains that, as a white British dramatist, he could do nothing else but follow Radcliffe in «his curtails». The judge is positioned centerstage, not only in his official capacity to sentence on the destiny of millions of South-Asian people, but also in an inherently metonymic function that renders him the embodiment of the flawed and waning authority of the British Raj. The play extensively and ironically dwells on Radcliffe's «impossible task to draw a straight line in a bent situation»²⁸ and privatizes the crisis the moment it injects in the drama 'existentialist' overtones, by drawing an ingenious parallel between Radcliffe's and Arjuna's moral obligation to act and accept the consequences of action²⁹. On Mountbatten's refusal to offer advice to solve the vexed question about «where Pakistan is to exist

²⁵ *The Romans in Britain* «demand of a contemporary audience the need to requestion past cultural models as an essential prerequisite for any analysis of the present. History, in political theatre of this kind, is no longer static and settled; past and present co-exist in a troubled but irresistible discourse», Bull, *New British Political Dramatists*, p. 209.

²⁶ Brenton, Preface to *Plays: 2*, Methuen, London 1989, p. x.

²⁷ Herman, *Playwright Howard Brenton*.

²⁸ Herman, *Playwright Howard Brenton*.

²⁹ In Herman's interview, Brenton maintains that the Bhagavad Gita is a difficult text for Westerners and insists on the similarities between the Sartrian existentialist idea that action is the inescapable prerogative of human beings and the principle of disinterested action propounded by Hindu theology.

on the surface of the planet»³⁰ and where to place Kashmir, which Hindu and Muslim delegates are not willing to give up, Radcliffe replies:

RADCLIFFE. Have you read the Bhagavad Gita?

MOUNTBATTEN. The Hindu religious thingy? God no.

RADCLIFFE. The warrior Arjuna is on a battlefield. He wearies at the bloodshed and refuses to fight. The god Krishna appears and tells him he has no choice. It is his karma to fight³¹.

Radcliffe resorting to the Bhagavad Gita to justify the impossible task of splitting India in two supplies a touch of pure orientalist comedy but is also a historicizing gesture hinting at the poem's post-independence political use (and abuse) as a national epic. In Act II, scene 9, Krishna appears to Radcliffe who is writing to the British Prime Minister to resign his mandate and prompts him to continue his attempts at negotiating an agreement between Hindu and Muslim delegates, by reminding him of the Bhagavad Gita's deepest tenet according to which choice and action are the essence of living. Accordingly, out of exhaustion, Radcliffe sketches out what he expects will be the final border between the two countries – a border he will be forced to change again and again to satisfy the demands of the contenders, in particular Mountbatten's request to include the region of Ferozepur in the Indian territory on Edwina's and Nehru's pressures³²:

RADCLIFFE. Action taken!

RAO. Sir, I beg you, why?

RADCLIFFE. Divine revelation³³.

The significance of the Hindu sacred text, which advocates non-egoic and disinterested action, is thus entirely reversed the moment the overstrained judge comes to draw the line in consequence of a mystical vision only to put an end to his anguish. Here the parallel with Arjuna tempted to leave the battlefield, yielding to Krishna's command, and selflessly embracing his own responsibility, reveals its paramount incongruity. Brenton's corrosive irony is levelled at Radcliffe's sheer ignorance of India geography and culture, as much as at the Raj administration that exploited his ignorance to circumvent the predictable outcomes of separating religious communities that had coexisted in the same land for centuries. Yet, beyond rehearsing the most obdurate colonial habit of reducing India to its religious culture, the judge's mystical exit ennobles his personal crisis and displaces the intractable question of Partition violence from a political to a moral level of discourse. The dramatist's compassionate look on the pathetic judge, whose short Indian stay turned into a hellish *rite de passage*

³⁰ Brenton, *Drawing the Line*, p. 73.

³¹ Brenton, *Drawing the Line*, p. 73.

³² In Herman's interview Brenton mentions a recently published document proving that Mountbatten insistently pressured Radcliffe to place Ferozepur within Indian territory.

³³ Brenton, *Drawing the Line*, p. 80.

from innocence to experience, somehow outshines all the rest³⁴. The conclusion of the play resonates with all the ambiguity of the situation, as Brenton orchestrates the final scene by means of two parallel and ostensibly clashing dialogues. In the first, Nehru, Jinnah, and Gandhi celebrate Indian independence and the birth of Pakistan in terms of a great historical achievement bearing enormous political responsibilities, as well as the promise of a new era for the subcontinent:

JINNAH. The creation of the new state has placed a tremendous responsibility on the citizens of Pakistan... [...]. It gives us an opportunity to demonstrate to the world how a nation, containing many elements, can live in peace and amity and work for the betterment of all its citizens, irrespective of caste and creed...

NEHRU. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, find utterance.

[...]

GANDHI. Hindus should never be angry against the Muslims. If they put all of us to the sword, we should court death bravely. Offer yourselves as non-violent willing sacrifices. We are all destined to be born and die, then why need we feel gloomy over it?³⁵

In the second dialogue, a morose Radcliffe, dressed in British clothes and burning all the Indian papers and maps in his Oxford garden, communicates his anxiety to a thoughtless wife:

Enter ANTONIA. She carries an unopened umbrella.

ANTONIA. Darling, it's coming to rain, what are you doing?

RADCLIFFE. Burning it all, the papers, all the maps...

ANTONIA. Cyril, my dear, it's settled, it's done.

RADCLIFFE.

You think so?

They look at the fire for a moment. Then ANTONIA looks up and is opening her umbrella.

*End of play*³⁶.

In Herman's interview Brenton explains that the details about Radcliffe's guilt-ridden reaction to his imperial mission – namely, secreting all the documents and refusing his fee – are historically reliable. Still, more than other historical plays *Drawing the Line* exposes his mordant sarcasm in combination with

³⁴ «Rite of passage» (p. 63) is the expression Radcliffe employs on the phone with his wife Antonia to refer to his dysentery fit. In the Preface to his *Plays: 1*, describing his «Anti-Theory Theories», Brenton writes: «In retrospect, these are the principles. The characters, like William Blake's poems, go from innocence to experience. The stories are journeys of discovery. The characters change radically. Their past is rarely referred to, what is of importance is their present», p. XI.

³⁵ Brenton, *Drawing the Line*, p. 94.

³⁶ Brenton, *Drawing the Line*, p. 95.

a measure of unsuspected sympathy, whose understated message seems to be that, after all, though not exactly a fair game, Partition was the inevitable cost of Indian independence³⁷. As a reviewer wrote, «Brenton crams an amazing amount in but leaves [you] wishing it had explored alternative scenarios to the hectic timetable for Indian independence»³⁸.

3. *The mother of the country*

Interestingly, the site where the play eschews historical truth has to do with Gandhi's role in the negotiations of the Border Commission. Brenton shows the Mahatma obstinately determined to withdraw from all religious and political disputes and unwilling to meet the British judge who «liberal or not, [...] will want to hang us all»³⁹:

NEHRU. Bapu, I fear this judge's ignorance. I implore you, talk to him, enlighten him.

GANDHI. No. [...] I will not compromise with the British, suddenly, after all these years of struggle. They remain the imperialists, the occupiers of my country. [...]

NEHRU. Meet Radcliffe, help him make a just border.

GANDHI. There can be no just border.

[...]

NEHRU. But we will have an India, free, independent, democratic, tolerant of all faiths. That is what we have struggled for.

GANDHI. But cut in two. I will not support partition. Vivisect me, before you vivisect India⁴⁰.

Along with the Dalit women who, in a refugee camp, accuse Nehru of killing their families and hit him on the face at the end of the play, Gandhi appears as the ultimate bulwark of resistance to the pressure of realpolitik and to a solution of the crisis negotiated under the auspices of the British empire. His idealistic refusal to compromise with the Raj mirrors Radcliffe's unrealistic ambition to draw the right line between India and Pakistan and corroborates, by contrast, Nehru's and Jinnah's pragmatism, as well as the former's concern about Gandhi's risk of becoming «an irrelevance»⁴¹ in the new independent nation.

To balance Gandhi's abstinence from political and sexual activity («I need warmth at night. [...] Without sexual intercourse»)⁴², the play widely dwells on Edwina Mountbatten's and Nehru's love affair. In Herman's interview, Brenton

³⁷ A study deeply in contrast with the inevitability theory is Khan, *The Great Partition*.

³⁸ M. Billington, *The Guardian*, 10 December 2013.

³⁹ According to Kahn, Gandhi met the Border Commission.

⁴⁰ Brenton, *Drawing the Line*, pp. 28-29.

⁴¹ Brenton, *Drawing the Line*, p. 28.

⁴² Brenton, *Drawing the Line*, p. 27.

describes Edwina as a sexually hyperactive and radical woman who had a *liaison* with an Indian band leader and was a «terrific philanthropist». When the two met, Nehru was a widower and was famous for his love affairs. As the family of Gandhi refused to release the nature of the letters Edwina sent to him, Brenton subscribed to the shared assumption that Nehru and Edwina «slept together»⁴³. The romance is portrayed in terms of a totalizing human relationship in which physical passion merges with political commitment, a commitment that, in the woman's case, assumes objectifying and predatory accents:

EDWINA. Judge Cyril Radcliffe is an assassin. Sent to murder our country.

NEHRU. 'Our country'? You really do think of India as your country, don't you.

EDWINA. I've fallen in love with you and you are India.

NEHRU. No no no, Edwina, you must not talk like that, no one 'is' India...

EDWINA. You are, when you're in my bed⁴⁴.

In keeping with a rooted Anglo-Indian literary trope, the couple embodies the sentimental bond between colonizers and colonized and is thus offered as an allegory of both colonial and postcolonial conviviality. Yet, while Edwina reproduces the Western essentializing habit of overlapping India and Hinduism and ignores the country's religious and cultural plurality, Nehru refuses to subscribe to her simplifications. The woman celebrates her sexual freedom and India's independence as one and the same achievement, to the extent that, on approaching August 15, she naively fancies she can divorce Mountbatten and marry Nehru:

EDWINA. I'm not playing, I want to be your wife.

[...]

NEHRU. The first lady of India. [...] You would be wonderful. You would be the mother of the country⁴⁵.

In Hindu nationalist iconography, Mother India, or *Bharat Mata*, is both a goddess and a geographical entity embodying «a real, warm, all-embracing mother figure»⁴⁶. Nehru's use of the image in this context bespeaks the extent to which personal feelings can nourish people's political imaginary and, simultaneously, alludes to the profundity of Edwina's cultural conversion. For all her blind spots, Edwina is the only British character acting out of humanitarian concerns and works as a point of entry into the tragedy of ethnic cleansing and mass migration that followed Partition. Her involvement in the destiny of hundred thousand people uprooted from their homes and forced into refugee camps sheds further light on Radcliffe's aseptic thoroughness as well as on Mountbatten's callousness. As a passionate British woman respectful of Indian culture and committed to peace and philanthropy, Edwina is clearly invested

⁴³ Herman, *Playwright Howard Brenton*.

⁴⁴ Brenton, *Drawing the Line*, p. 25.

⁴⁵ Brenton, *Drawing the Line*, p. 93.

⁴⁶ Kahn, *The Great Partition*, p. 94.

with a redemptive function. Conversely, her husband's urgency to conclude his imperial mission and return to Britain is offered as *the* reason for hastening the work of the commission and squeezing to five weeks the time originally allotted to divide the two countries. The climax of cynicism is achieved the moment Mountbatten overtly places the coveted separation of his wife from the Indian leader before Radcliffe's reasonable request for extra time to draw the line. On this point, Brenton endorses an updated historiography that reverses the Viceroy's previous «hagiography»⁴⁷ and assigns to his marital anxieties a central role in the miasma of Indian Partition⁴⁸:

MOUNTBATTE. Do you love him? [...] I would do it.

EDWINA. Do what?

MOUNTBATTEN. Wreck a continent to keep you⁴⁹.

Along with Radcliffe's crisis of authority, Edwina's and Nehru's romance is the axis around which the geopolitics of *Drawing the Line* revolve. Their uninhibited passion, their anti-imperialist creed, and their stoic renunciation provide a compelling allegory of the human sacrifice entailed by Indian Partition, as well a *trait d'union* between colonial and postcolonial Anglo-Indian relations. Not only. Edwina's vocalized sexual freedom hints, by tragic contrast, at the policy of genocidal violence and organized rape adopted by Muslim and Hindu communal groups after Partition, of which women were the targeted victims. Yet the drama's system of allusions is too oblique to convey an unequivocal and persuasive critique of Britain's imbrication in the violence of Partition. On the contrary, the final impression is that the woman's sincere concern for the destiny of India and Indians somewhat sublimates the horrors of history.

Once the history of Empire became a source of discomfort, shame, and perplexity, its complexities and ambiguities were readily set aside. Rather than work through those feeling, that unsettling history was diminished, denied, and then, if possible, actively forgotten. The resulting silence feeds an additional catastrophe: the error of imagining that postcolonial people are only unwanted alien intruders without any substantive historical, political, or cultural connections to the collective life of their fellow subjects.

These extraordinary failures have obstructed the arterial system of Britain's political body in many ways. They deserve the proper name of 'postimperial melancholia' in order simultaneously to underline this syndrome's links with the past and its pathological character⁵⁰.

⁴⁷ Wolpert, *Shameful Flight*, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Mountbatten «achieved a much-coveted agreement between the League and the Congress by refusing to dwell on the implications of his actions, instead emphasizing the practical aspects and stressing the expediency of finding a constitutional settlement», Kahn, *The Great Partition*, pp. 87-88.

⁴⁹ Brenton, *Drawing the Line*, p. 84.

⁵⁰ Gilroy, *After Empire*, p. 98.

Clearly, *Drawing the Line* does not sanction the effacement of imperial history censured by Paul Gilroy. Albeit in circuitous ways, it does intervene in the contemporary debate about the need to confront Britain's bleak past to overcome the national pathology of postimperial melancholia and foster a more convivial culture. Yet the play registers all the discomfort and perplexities connected to the political event that has undoubtedly represented the nadir of the British Raj. In the interviews Brenton argued that he dramatized Partition for a white audience as much as for an Asian audience, presumably suggesting that the former would automatically credit the empire's good intentions, whereas the latter would rather embrace the opposite view. Considered from a post-ethnic perspective, the statement is at least suspect, since it classifies the audience response to conflicting historical narratives according to a racial paradigm that risks replicating obsolete colonial distinctions. When the interviewer asked him to comment on the relevance of this historical drama for a contemporary public, Brenton generically replied that *Drawing the Line* was «a play about the end of an empire»⁵¹. Espoused by a veteran militant dramatist like him, such a disavowal of topicality sounds rather bewildering⁵². Be it literal or provocative, this reticence speaks volumes about the embarrassed and still unprocessed legacy of Indian Partition in the British historical and cultural imaginary.

⁵¹ Herman, *Playwright Howard Brenton*.

⁵² To mention only the most obvious echoes of Partition that were coextensive with the production of *Drawing the Line*, in January 2013 Indian-Pakistan border skirmishes caused new casualties and received global media coverage.