



## PARTITION THROUGH THE LENS OF LITERATURE AND POPULAR CULTURE, AS WELL AS ITS LONG-TERM IMPACT ON THE CURRENT GENERATION

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### Abstract

This paper aims to assess the partition of India not only as a historical phenomenon but also its long-term effect on the lives of the people who lived through it. The attempt is to understand the impact of the trauma generated in the minds of the sufferers because of the atrocities committed during that time. The paper also tries to analyze the aftermath of the event and how it continues to exert its influence on the following generations. This is intended to be done by examining accounts, novels, and short stories written, as well as movies made on the theme of partition. Some of the authors whose works are to be included are Khushwant Singh (Train to Pakistan), Amitav Ghosh (Shadow Lines), Saadat Hasan Manto (Toba Tek Singh, Khol Do), Bapsi Sidhwa (Ice Candy Man), Geetanjali Shree (Tomb of Sand), et al.

*Keywords: Trauma, Partition, Theme, Atrocities*

### INTRODUCTION

"At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment 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, finds utterance." Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of our sovereign nation, remarked on the afore-mentioned statement on the eve of Indian independence. Behind the curtain of pomp and pride of the birth of the largest democratic nation lies one of the bloodiest episodes humankind has ever witnessed: the Partition. A civilization that was more than 5000 years old was decisively torn into two separate nations, namely India and Pakistan. Further, Pakistan was peculiarly comprised of two states that were neither geographically nor culturally attached to each other: West Pakistan and East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). The only point of similarity between the two was their religious majority; Pakistan had a Muslim majority, while Indians were supposed to be predominantly Hindu. What resulted was perhaps the largest forced migration in history. Between 1946 and 1948, over 20 million people were displaced, 1 million were killed, and several others went missing. The religious communities, which had coexisted for more than a thousand years on the subcontinent, were suddenly boiling with hatred against each other. Their twisted idea of religious zeal led them to perform heinous acts, including kidnappings, murder, rape, and mutilation. Even after the atrocities had stopped, the generational trauma continued to stay with the people who survived. Several poems, stories, novels, songs, and movies continue to tell the story of the pain, suffering, and acute identity crisis that these people experienced, sometimes better than history itself. The aim of this paper is to analyze a handful of them and try to appreciate their contribution to the saga of partition.



### **Borders and belongingness in “Toba Tek Singh”**

The boundaries between the countries, known popularly as the Radcliffe Line, were crafted in a mere five weeks by the British authorities under the supervision of Sir Cyril Radcliffe. It is important to note that these people had little knowledge about the Indian terrain or culture. Consequentially, there was a severe identity crisis among the people displaced, who could not understand to which place they actually belonged. Saadat Hasan Manto's satirical short story “Toba Tek Singh” (1955) is set in a lunatic asylum in Pakistan a few years after the partition. The Sikh inmate, Bishan Singh, assumes that his village is somewhere called Toba Tek Singh. Being mentally deranged, he is oblivious to the fact that he belongs to India or Pakistan. As the Sikh and Hindu inmates are ordered to be transferred to India, Bishan Singh refuses to comply as someone tells him that Toba Tek Singh is in Pakistan. Chaos ensues at the time of exchange at the Wagha Border as Bishan Singh (also called Toba Tek Singh) is not ready to leave his homeland. The story ends with the following line: “There, behind the barbed wire, was Hindustan. Here, behind the same kind of barbed wire, was Pakistan. In between, on that piece of ground that had no name lay Toba Tek Singh.” Manto skillfully hides an undeniable truth behind the guise of Bishan Singh's illogical mutterings: that men and women weren't sure where their home was truly located.

### **The Screams Silenced: Predicament of Women during Partition as Reflected in ‘Khol Do’, ‘Pinjar’, and ‘The Other Side of Silence’**

Women were certainly the worst victims of partition. Around 75,000 of them were kidnapped, raped, forcefully married, and even mutilated by the enraging militia without any moral scruples. The age-old idea of women as the ‘honor’ of families was imposed by patriarchy from time immemorial. This led men to kill their own daughters, wives, and sisters in order to save the ‘reputation’ of the family. Manto's short story ‘Khol Do’ (1948) is beyond shock rendering as they express the primal lust hidden in humankind and their monster-like instincts that view women as nothing but a piece of dead flesh. Young girls like Sakina didn't have the option to escape the clutches of the sexual predators, which consisted of men from all sections of society, from ruffians to doctors.

In her account ‘The Other Side of Silence’ (1998), Urvashi Butalia narrates the traumatic recollections of several victims, especially women. A close examination of these accounts brings forward two paradoxical narratives. On one hand, the nation is honored in the form of ‘Divine Mother’, and on the other, there lies the silence that women have carried within them for ages. Sexual violence has been considered taboo since time immemorial, and hence women have restrained themselves from revealing it to anyone for fear of humiliation and ostracization. Butalia brings forward the story of Harbhajan Kaur, who was abducted and then forcibly married by Afzal Khan. She is renamed Shehnaj, and with him, she bears five children. Later, when Harbhajan is reunited with her parents, they refuse to part with her. She is remarried to a Sikh man, and Afzal has to return to Pakistan with the children. After several years, her grandson from her second marriage comes across the story she had been hiding for years and her desire to meet her children in Pakistan.

Amrita Pritam, in her 1950 novel ‘Pinjar’ (translated as cage), narrates the incident of Puro, a girl from Lahore who suffers from a similar plight after being picked up by a man called Rashid. Later, when she flees Rashid's place, her family refuses to accept her as they think her purity is ‘contaminated’. Puro is left with no other option but to return to Rashid and accept him as her husband. Her plight compels us to reminisce about the sufferings of several such young women who were disowned by their own families as their ‘chastity’ was compromised. The pain of Puro and Shehnaj mirrors that of those innumerable women who were dislocated with their identities snatched from them.



### Religious hatred and its psychological impact: Bapsi Sidhwa's 'Ice Candy Man' (1988)

In 'Ice Candy Man' (later published as 'Cracking India' in 1991), Bapsi Sidhwa narrates the story from the perspective of an eight-year-old paraplegic girl, Lenny. She belongs to a well-to-do Parsi family based in Lahore and spends most of her time with her *ayah* Shanta. Shanta is romantically admired by Dilnawaz, an ice cream seller, but his feelings are unreciprocated by her. Instead, Shanta is attracted to Hassan, whose calm demeanor foils the boisterous nature of Dilnawaz. The incidents take a tragic turn when Dilnawaz's sister is killed in the partition riots. This fills the mind of Dilnawaz with hatred against the Hindus. Hassan gets killed for overtly supporting the Hindus, and with the assistance of other fanatics, Dilnawaz forcefully takes away Shanta. An adult Lenny narrates that the fate of Shanta remained unclear as she never came across her *ayah* again in her life. The novel was later adopted by Deepa Mehta into an equally thought-provoking movie titled '1947 Earth' that was released in 1998 and featured Shabana Azmi, Nandita Das, and Amir Khan.

Brutality prevailed on both sides of the border, and torturing the weak was made the weapon of collective vengeance. Trauma and loss birthed malevolent intent in the minds of civilians like Dilnawaz, turning them into metaphorical beasts of prey, as the former calls himself at one point of the movie. Killings and destruction gave rise to even more of the same, and people were caught in their vicious circles. This reminds us of Khushwant Singh's 'Train to Pakistan' where Singh rightfully states, "The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped."

### Life Subsequent to Partition: Ritwik Ghatak's Partition Trilogy

In the films of the film stalwart, Ghatak, the pain of partition is poignant among the protagonists, who are often refugees suffering from the loss of homeland and livelihood. His critically acclaimed film 'Meghe Dhaka Tara' ('Cloud-capped Star', 1960) is set in a refugee colony on the outskirts of Calcutta. The refugees, who were uprooted from their own land, profusely struggled to make ends meet in the foreign land. The film narrates the story of Nita (Supriya Devi), a young woman who is compelled to sacrifice her education, love, health, and eventually her life in order to financially sustain her family. Even her family gives up on her at the end, as she contracts tuberculosis. In the final scene, Nita throws herself in her brother's arms with a gut wrenching cry: "Brother, I want to live!" The protagonist's desperate appeal echoes the cries of numerous youths whose lives were wasted away in constant struggle and sacrifice as the country fell apart. Nita's struggle reveals another paradox of Partition; although Partition made women victims of extreme violence and oppression but the post-partition Indian society saw women becoming bread-winners for their family.

'Komal Gandhar' released in 1961 deals with the lamentations of the victims of partition, agonized with the memories of famine and riots. The two orphan protagonists perfectly portray the emotions of people who have lost their home and family. The final film of the trilogy is *Subarnarekha* ('The Golden Thread', 1962). It is one of the rare films from that era with a prominent Dalit character. In the film, although the refugees are struggling to survive, they don't refrain from practicing caste-based discrimination in their camps. The mother of a small Dalit boy, Abhiram, is carried off by the goons of the Zamindar, after which he is fostered by a Brahmin, Ishwar Chakravarty. As they grow up, the boy and Ishwar's younger sister, Sita (Madhabi Mukherjee), fall in love. When Ishwar objects to their relationship due to the boy's caste, they elope together. Ishwar Chakravarty, being a Brahmin, easily gets a job, while the Dalit Abhiram, despite having an honors degree, struggles to survive as a bus driver. The caste-based obsession bears a tragic outcome at the climax of the film. The bus Abhiram is driving accidentally kills a young girl, and the former is lynched to death. Sita, with no other option, has to resort to prostitution. In the movie, Ghatak artistically portrays the two worlds that existed side by side in the 1950s: "on the one hand, refugees suffering from acute poverty, and on the other hand, a nation



succumbing to modern decadence." The movie has a devastating ending, which again marks the theme of 'lost home' associated with the partition.

### Longing for Lost Homes: Amitav Ghosh's 'The Shadow Lines' and Geetanjali Shree's 'Tomb of Sand'

Ghosh's second novel, 'The Shadow Lines', was published in 1988, and it has an anonymous narrator who grew up in post-Partition Calcutta. His grandmother, affectionately called Tha'mma, arrived in India as a refugee. Being a nationalist by heart, she rejects the idea of partition outright. Throughout the novel, boundaries are depicted as nothing but shadows, which have divided people carrying the same cultural and regional identities. Tha'mma is unable to understand that going to her childhood hometown of Dacca would now require a permit as it lies in a separate country. The novel focuses on the generational trauma that persists even in the narrator's cousin Ila, who belongs to the Indian diaspora. As an NRI, she suffers from the feeling of dislocation from her childhood. In an attempt to find an alternative identity, she weds Nick Price, a British. Later, the marriage turns out to be disastrous.

The novel is divided into two parts: 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home'. Nostalgia revolving around one's past and the constant dream of returning to one's homeland form the central essence of the novel. Tha'mma's longing for her hometown leads her to travel to Dacca in the context of bringing her aging uncle Shri Goshtobihari Bose back. Their journey drives the novel towards its devastating climax, where the narrator's uncle Tridib is killed in the 1964 Dacca riot. Tridib's horrifying nemesis reveals another hard truth to the readers. The communal frenzy and inter-religious hatred can be triggered anytime and can wreak havoc on life.

A theme of longing for one's lost home has also found its way in Geetanjali Shree's International Booker Prize-winning novel 'Tomb of Sand' (originally published as *Ret Samadhi* in Hindi, translated by Daisy Rockwell in 2018). The story follows an octogenarian mother, Chandraprabha Devi, referred to as *Ma* throughout the novel. The old woman, who had been in depression ever since her husband's death, attempted to find a new lease in life through her desire to travel to Pakistan. The crack on the wall into which she stares constantly in her state of despair becomes a symbol of the huge crevasse that created the hearts of the uprooted people as they pined to see their motherland. Like Tha'mma in *Shadow Lines*, the country's borders fail to convey any meaning to her, as her only desire is to unite with her childhood lover and her first husband, Anwar. Eventually Ma makes her way to Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, searching for her ex-husband and, ostensibly, the part of herself hewn off by the border's enforcement. Shree's 'Tomb of Sand', through its success in making the readers confront the unhealed border wound, carries the legacy of the long lineage of partition literature.

### Conclusion

It is impossible to deny the profoundness of the impact that partition has had on the lives of the people living on the subcontinent. The brutality Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs unleashed on each other "destroyed our social sense, changed our political judgments, and destroyed our understanding of morality." Forced migrations still continue, creating a sense of anguish, anxiety, and deprivation. The stories of such people mostly remain unheard and unknown. Yet for the victims, forgetting them is unimaginable. History gives us information about major events and the statistics related to them. It is literature, films, and documentaries that unearth the hidden history that remains buried in time. Reading or watching them is like taking a journey inward that reveals an indubitable truth about the nature of human existence.



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