

Article

Narrating the Wound: Psychoanalytic and Cultural Representations of PTSD in South Asian Partition Literature

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Abstract: This paper examines the representation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in Partition fiction, analysing how literary narratives capture the psychic scars of the 1947 Partition of India. Drawing on cultural theory and psychoanalysis, the study argues that fiction by Saadat Hasan Manto, Khushwant Singh, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Bhisham Sahni articulates trauma as a collective cultural wound and an individual psychological rupture. Using Cathy Caruth's theories of trauma, Freud's model of the return of the repressed, and postcolonial cultural frameworks, the paper explores narrative strategies that convey flashbacks, fragmentation, and the uncanny. These fictions render the violence of Partition not only as a historical fact but as a pervasive, haunting psychological presence, challenging nationalist historiographies that sanitize or erase suffering. By foregrounding PTSD in these narratives, the paper highlights literature's vital role in witnessing and working through cultural trauma.

Keywords: partition fiction; PTSD; trauma theory; cultural memory; psychoanalysis

Introduction

The Partition of British India in 1947, which created the independent nations of India and Pakistan, stands as one of the twentieth century's most traumatic geopolitical ruptures. With an estimated one million dead, twelve to fifteen million displaced, and countless acts of sexual violence and brutality, Partition was not simply a political event but a profound human calamity, a tremendous tragedy of human civilization. Literary representations of Partition have become crucial archives of this trauma. While historical accounts often struggle to convey the subjective, affective experience of violence and dislocation, fiction renders these psychic wounds palpable. This paper examines how key Partition fictions thematize what modern psychiatry would recognize as PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) –persistent, invasive memories,

flashbacks, dissociation, and numbed affect—long before such diagnostic categories were widely known or accepted in South Asia.

By reading works like Saadat Hasan Manto's *Toba Tek Singh*, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*, and Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* through cultural theory and psychoanalysis, the paper argues that these texts not only record history but critique it, revealing the deep psychological costs that nationalist narratives often obscure. It goes without saying that human suffering is a common factor in all these works, but the hues and shades of suffering vary. It is a tragedy that has catalysed both personal tragedy and social catastrophe. It is a huge cultural trauma that has long-lasting repercussions. As the pivotal focus of this paper is on the works of Saadat Hasan Manto, Khushwant Singh, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Bhisham Sahni, it is fascinating to note that each of these legendary wordsmiths has an absolutely unique and thought-provoking point of view on the same events or series of incidents.

Partition as Cultural Trauma: Theoretical Framework/Methodology

The concept of trauma in cultural theory moves beyond the individual, medicalized sense of PTSD to encompass collective, intergenerational experiences. Cathy Caruth famously describes trauma as an encounter with an event so overwhelming that it escapes full conscious assimilation: "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature... returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 4). In the context of Partition, this haunting is both personal and cultural. The event shattered not only lives but also communities, traditions, and shared identities. Freud's notion of the return of the repressed is equally relevant. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes trauma as an experience that cannot be integrated into normal consciousness, instead returning through dreams, compulsions, or neurotic symptoms: "The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it" (Freud 18). Partition fiction often enacts precisely this process: the repressed horror of Partition returns in fragmented, uncanny narrative forms that resist closure. Such texts become spaces for cultural mourning and for challenging the erasures of official historiography. They not only exhibit the human suffering of a specific time zone, but they are a wake-up call of humanity for the present and a lesson to remember for the future.

Saadat Hasan Manto's *Toba Tek Singh*: The Madness of Borders

Manto's short story *Toba Tek Singh* is arguably the quintessential Partition narrative of trauma. Set in a psychiatric asylum during the exchange of inmates between India and Pakistan, the story satirizes the arbitrary nature of national borders while foregrounding psychological devastation. The protagonist, Bishan Singh, cannot comprehend the logic of Partition: "'Where is Toba Tek Singh?' he shouted" (Manto 14). His repeated question is both absurd and poignant, dramatizing the epistemological collapse that Partition engenders. In Freud's terms, the asylum becomes a figure of the unconscious where repressed fears and desires are displaced. Bishan Singh's madness is not individual pathology but a rational response to an irrational world. Critics have

read this story as an allegory of cultural trauma. Alok Bhalla observes: “The asylum is the only sane place in a world that has lost its moral bearings” (Bhalla 23). Manto’s pen seems to be drenched in acid. His scathing statements and unabashed narration of human behaviour make his short stories not just heart-wrenching but classic in the canon of Urdu fiction in general and World Literature in particular. He shows darkness as it is, without mincing words. He refuses catharsis; the narrative ends with Bishan Singh dying in no man’s land, a literalization of in-betweenness and loss. The story’s form—abrupt, blackly comic, unredeemed—enacts the fragmentation and repetition characteristic of trauma narratives. Through the metaphor of madness and asylum, Manto aims a scathing sarcasm at the political madness caused by a few ambitious people, devastating the lives of millions on both sides of the border.

Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*: Witnessing Violence

Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* (1956) is another foundational Partition text that stages trauma through affect and narrative voice. Set in the fictional Mano Majra, the novel moves from pastoral calm to genocidal violence, exposing the complicity of ordinary people in atrocity. Singh uses a restrained, almost journalistic tone to narrate horrific events: “The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both raped” (*Train to Pakistan* 125). This blunt, almost affectless sentence structure mirrors the numbing of affect in PTSD. Cathy Caruth notes that trauma is marked by belatedness and a crisis of representation: “It is always the story of a wound that cries out” (Caruth 4). Singh’s prose resists sentimental resolution; even when the Sikh protagonist sacrifices himself to save Muslim refugees, the act is less redemptive than tragic, underlining the irreparable rupture. Moreover, the recurring imagery of the train full of corpses becomes a haunting, almost cinematic motif—a traumatic flashback that returns to disrupt any fantasy of communal harmony.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man*: Gendered Trauma

Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man* (also published as *Cracking India*) offers a complex, gendered account of Partition trauma. Narrated by Lenny, a Parsi child in Lahore, the novel filters collective violence through a child’s partial, often confused consciousness. This technique resonates with Freud’s idea of screen memories—distorted recollections that protect against unassimilable horror. The novel repeatedly foregrounds sexual violence as emblematic of Partition’s brutality. Lenny’s beloved Ayah is abducted and raped, her body literally marked by communal hatred: “She is as if she has been poured into herself” (*Ice-Candy-Man* 251). This unsettling image conveys dissociation, a well-documented symptom of PTSD. Cathy Caruth emphasizes that trauma resists narrative mastery; Sidhwa’s fragmented, childlike storytelling reflects this impossibility. Feminist critics such as Urvashi Butalia have argued that women’s bodies became the battlefield for nationalist honour. *Ice-Candy-Man* exposes this gendered dynamic while also implicating the reader in voyeuristic complicity.

Bhisham Sahni’s *Tamas*: The Banality of Horror

Bhisham Sahni’s *Tamas* offers an unflinching portrayal of Partition violence in a small Punjabi town. The novel opens with a dead pig being thrown into a mosque—a

catalyst for riot and massacre. Sahni's narrative strategy emphasizes the ordinariness of communal hatred and its catastrophic escalation. Freud's notion of the death drive is useful here. The characters' compulsive participation in violence suggests a libidinal investment in destruction. As one character remarks: "We have to kill them or they will kill us" (*Tamas* 198).

This stark either/or logic reduces the other to a threat to be eliminated. Freud describes such aggression as a fundamental part of human psychology, redirected outward in the service of group cohesion. Sahni also uses the symbol of darkness—*tamas*—as a metaphor for collective unconscious drives. The novel's structure, with shifting viewpoints and temporal disjunctions, enacts trauma's fragmentation. It refuses narrative closure, instead insisting on the need to confront this "darkness" honestly. It showcases *Tamas* of the human psyche, which is eternal, ubiquitous, and unavoidable.

Psychoanalysis and Cultural Memory

Psychoanalysis offers a vocabulary for understanding not only individual pathology but collective, cultural trauma. Freud's idea of the uncanny—the return of the repressed in familiar settings—permeates Partition fiction. Familiar landscapes become sites of horror: the train, the village well, the household. Caruth argues that trauma disrupts linear temporality, creating belated, recurring flashbacks: "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth 5). Partition fiction frequently stages such returns. The past is not past; it erupts in memory, language, and social relations. This literature enacts what Dominick LaCapra calls "working through"—a process of acknowledging trauma rather than disavowing it.

Cultural Theory: Partition as Rupture and Narrative

From a cultural theory perspective, Partition represents not just historical violence but a rupture in narrative itself. Homi Bhabha describes the nation as "narrated," dependent on shared myths of origin. Partition explodes these myths, revealing the nation as a violent, exclusionary construction. Partition fiction resists nationalist teleology. It refuses the sanitizing, heroic narratives of independence, instead focusing on dislocation, loss, and memory. As Priya Kumar notes: "Partition fiction constitutes a counter-archive." (Kumar 21) This counter-archive records subaltern voices—women, peasants, refugees—whose suffering official histories marginalize. Trauma becomes a mode of cultural critique, unsettling triumphalist histories. Partition literature addresses the concerns of the aforesaid strata of society – women, common people, migrants... in other words, those who live on the periphery of the social setup.

Conclusion: Literature as Witness

Partition fiction's representation of PTSD does not merely diagnose individual suffering. It bears witness to a collective trauma that remains unresolved in South Asian culture and politics. By deploying narrative strategies that mirror the symptoms of trauma—repetition, fragmentation, the uncanny—these works insist that the violence of Partition cannot be contained or forgotten. Manto's absurd asylum, Singh's corpse-

laden train, Sidhwa's violated Ayah, Sahni's darkened town: these images haunt the reader, refusing catharsis. They remind us that trauma is not only a wound but a demand—for recognition, for justice, for mourning. In confronting Partition's psychic aftershocks, these texts perform the vital work of cultural memory. They make visible what history would prefer to forget, ensuring that the trauma of 1947 remains an ethical imperative for the present.

It is an undeniable fact that the partition was not just an ordinary socio-political mishap, but rather it was a tectonic shift. Hence, the works of partition literature can be construed through various lenses. This research domain has a huge scope for further academic excavation. For instance, someone may focus on the torture and trauma that the women (regardless of caste, religion, or province) have faced and write a paper from the perspective of feminism or gender studies. Similarly, a psycholinguistic or sociolinguistic study of partition literature can also be conducted by the researchers. As the researcher has utilized multiple theoretical frameworks such as psychoanalysis, cultural study, etc, such multidisciplinary research on the gamut of partition literature can also be a fertile land for researchers. Moreover, many literary works from this genre have been adapted into a film or a TV serial or a web series, so cinematic adaptation of partition literature is also an area to be explored further, taking this paper as a reference.

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