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# Remembering Partition: Literature Across Testimony, Oral Histories, and Postmemory

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**Abstract**

*The Partition of India has resulted in a large literature which can be broadly categorized in three phases. These phases align with evolving lens with which the Partition is viewed and discussed, different cultural perspectives and changing historical sensibilities. These phases overlap and interlap each other and cannot be contained or described in terms of watertight compartments; both in terms of their periods or their themes and concerns. The first phase which roughly begins from right from 1947 and ends somewhere around mid-1960s makes use of the first hand experiences and witnesses to produce literature marked with vivid portrayal of violence and suffering. The second phase of Partition literature (1975-1997) takes up feminist and subaltern concerns and the nature of writings of this phase is more analytical and reflective rather than descriptive. The third phase of Partition literature (1997-present) is largely centred on emotional and psychological wounds caused by the Partition and a shift is seen from memory to postmemory. This phase also utilizes newer forms of digital and visual media to talk about Partition. This paper has attempted to talk about representational texts from different Indian languages like Bengali, Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi and to align Partition Literature in the broader frameworks of trauma theory, memory studies and postmemory. The objective of categorizing and compiling the literature that has been written around Partition from 1947 until now is to establish how Partition has continued to shape South Asian culture and memory over so many years differently in every generation.*
**Keywords:** *Partition literature; displacement; trauma; phases; oral histories; digital archives; postmemory, and visual media.*

## Introduction

The partition of India, being one of the biggest tragic geopolitical event in the history of South Asia had extremely grave repercussions on the humanitarian level. Families were torn apart, communities were fragmented, and the whole socio-cultural fabric of the nation was irreversibly altered. The political histories led the masses to believe that the decision of dividing India was a constitutional negotiation, but literature plays a vital role in laying bare the lived experience of the whole event. It somehow helps to bring out the personal in political, and, concurrently, it also establishes how a political decision taken more than seventy-five years ago continues to remain a relevant issue today. This is why when it comes to partition literature, it is not just considered as literature but rather as a counter-history, and thus the lines between fiction and nonfiction are blurred. Partition Literature brings out a completely different stance from the narrative that was spread by the ruling authorities about India getting independence. For once, the emphasis was less on statistics and figures and more on memory, affect, and testimony. Gyanendra Pandey has argued, "The violence of

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1947 has often been treated as someone else's history, or not even history at all" (32). Notably, literature captures the traumas, the silences, and the emotional residues that official archives exclude.

From 1947 to contemporary times, there have been primarily three phases of Partition literature, which roughly correspond to the three generations who have lived since the partition and have perceived and written about the partition differently than their previous generation. Each phase has had a different narrative strategy, distinct thematic concerns, and unique generational perspectives. The first phase, from the 1950s to the 1970s, was dominated by eyewitness fiction and emphasized testimonial immediacy. The second phase that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s paid attention to the feminist and subaltern voices that had been neglected in the struggle. The third phase, beginning in the 2000s, engages with diaspora, transnational memory, and multimedia forms, representing what Marianne Hirsch terms postmemory, the inherited trauma of subsequent generations (Hirsch 22). This paper aspires to locate the literary/critical trajectories of Partition literature through its successive phases of expression. By way of drawing on primary texts across multiple languages, viz., Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, and English, alongside influential critical interventions by scholars such as Gyanendra Pandey, Urvashi Butalia, Marianne Hirsch, and Alok Bhalla, the paper maps both continuities and shifts in the Partition discourse. The following is the tabular representation of the three phases under consideration:

| Phase | Data Range | Generation | Dominant Forms | Memory Mode | Representative Texts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **First Phase** | 1947-mid 1960s | First Generation (Direct witnesses) | Short stories, reportage, poems, realist novels | Immediate testimony, Eyewitness realism | Manto's "Toba Tek Singh," Singh's *Train to Pakistan,* Pritam's *Pinjar* |
| **Second Phase** | 1975-1997 | Second Generation (children of survivors) | Oral histories, memoirs, feminist retellings, documentary prose | Remembering and Silencing, Recovery of Voices | Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence,* Rushdie's *Midnight Children,* Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* |
| **Third Phase** | 1997-Present | Third Generation (Grandchildren, Diasporic voices) | Novels, Films, Graphic Fiction, Experimental Narratives | Postmemory, Remediation and transnational memory | Shree's *Tomb of Sand,* Ghosh's *This Side, That Side,* Faruqi's *The* |

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## The First Wave: Eyewitness Fiction (1950s-1970s)

The first phase of Partition literature was born from the immediacy of trauma. It was written by people who had firsthand experience of the brutalities and the horror of the Partition. Accordingly, the writings of the first phase were marked by testimonial urgency. The nature of these writings was extremely realist, and the descriptions of atrocities and displacement were written with stark reality. How actively the literature of the first phase was being produced even in the face of crisis can be understood when Naik emphasizes, "Actually the writer in Independent India, whether in English or in the regional languages, far from dwindling into a 'recorder' or 'embellisher,' has provided ample evidence of increased creative vigour and capacity for experimentation" (Naik 199-200). Unlike the later generations, this generation did not encounter the event of Partition as a site of scholarly inquiry, but rather oftentimes they wrote just to heal the raw wounds inflicted on them during Partition.

One of the most important texts belonging to the first wave is *Train to Pakistan* (1956), written by Khushwant Singh. Set in the fictional village of Mano Majra, which lies on the border of Punjab, the novel dramatizes how communal harmony collapses under the pressures of partition violence. The text depicts a vivid portrayal of village life before partition and during partition so that the reader can draw a stark contrast between the ignorant and harmonious life led by the villagers before Partition happened and the mass bloodshed and moral corruption that ensued during mass displacement. Singh has subtly used the symbol of the ghostly train filled with dead bodies to suggest the death of humanity. Juggut Singh sacrificing himself, towards the end, to save Muslim villagers makes him the novel's tragic hero. His act shows the futility and possibility of moral courage in the face of crisis.

If Singh's realism portrays the scope of violence, Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1973) deals with the insidious role of political manipulation to decode the nature of communal hatred. This novel, based on Sahni's own experience in Rawalpindi in 1947, opens with placing a dead pig strategically outside a mosque to incite a riot. The author has used perspectives of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and the British colonials to bring home the point that partition violence was not spontaneous or even situational but rather engineered by people in power for political gain. The fragmented narrative used in the novel is suggestive of the disintegration of communities that took place. Not surprisingly, when Tamas was adapted to be aired on television, its stark depiction of brutality led to controversy in the 1980s. Tamas remains a

critical text for understanding how Partition literature from the first wave balanced realism with political critique.

Discourse on the first phase of partition literature is incomplete without examining the oeuvre of Saadat Hasan Manto. His works have more testimonial urgency than any other Partition writer. He migrated from Bombay to Lahore in 1948 and was witness to the dislocation of artists and intellectuals in 1947. His seminal short stories include "Toba Tek Singh," "Khol Do," and "Thanda Ghosht," and many more, which lay bare the brutalities and horror of Partition in a manner that reveals the absurdity of the entire situation. Manto's style is marked by brevity and starkness, which amplify the horror rather than sensationalize it. Alok Bhalla observes, "A story of violence requires a certain degree of asceticism of language; it is precisely Manto's restraint which makes the original so disturbing." (Bhalla 25). Although he was tried in his lifetime for the obscenity in his works and is still criticized by a few, Manto remains foundational to partition literature because his works confront violence without romanticizing it.

Faiz Ahmad Faiz's "Subh-e-Azadi," written in 1947, and novels such as Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1959), Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* (1950), Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* (1998), and Krishan Chander's *Peshawar Express* (1965) are important examples of the first phase of partition literature. All the given texts are marked by immediacy and direct engagement with trauma. Faiz is the one who mourns the moral and emotional darkness that overshadows the dawn of independence, while Hossain and Hyder portray families grappling with social and cultural upheaval.

Along with Manto, other writers like Rajinder Singh Bedi, Intizar Hussain and Ismat Chughtai also contributed to the literature of the Phase of Partition Literature written in Urdu. Intizar Husain's Basti published in 1979, in which the Partition of 1947 is depicted through the character of Zakir who suffers from painful nostalgia, loss of identity and emotional turmoil. It is speculated to be semi-autobiographical. On the other hand, Ismat Chughtai's short story "Lihaaf" published in 1942 and Rajinder Singh Bedi's short story "Lajwanti" published in 1955 is centred on gendered violence and gendered trauma showing how women's bodies were abducted, violated and killed to defame and destroy the honour of the other community. This especially dehumanizes women and places women in the position of objects whose trauma and pain is neglected.

Along with Urdu, Hindi, Bengali and Punjabi literatures also flourished in the first phase of Partition Literature. Talking about Hindi literature of those times, Yashpal's *Jhootha Sach*

depicts the lives of the middle class sections of Delhi during the Partition of India. It was published in two volumes; the first volume titled Vatan or Desh was published in 1958 while the second volume titled Desh ka Bhavishya was published in 1960.On the other hand, Bengali literature centred around Partition is significant because Bengal as a state has experienced not just the 1947 Partition but also the failed attempt of partitioning Bengali along religious lines in 1905. Texts from Bengal that captured the nerve of Partition include "*Dharmarajer Deshe*" (1948) by Jibanananda Das, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) adapted by Ritwik Ghatak, and *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* (1967) by Jyotirmoyee Devi. Punjabi literature, with writers like Kartar Singh Duggal and Nanak Singh, frequently emphasized the violence in villages and disintegration of community bonds.

Regional literatures of those times refract how the first phase was not monolithic; rather, it was multifaceted, shaped by linguistic, rural, and geographic contexts. However, literature of the first phase had certain limitations in the sense that the first-wave writers ensured that Partition's horrors were documented, resisting the erasures of nationalist historiography. Accordingly, their works bear witness and somehow refuse to let the violence of 1947 fade into abstraction. Apart from this, these narratives also privilege male perspectives, with women's experiences represented symbolically, denying a fuller exploration. Urvashi Butalia notes:

> There was not much data on the renting part of the closely enmeshed fabric of society and the actual sufferings of the flesh and blood caught in the crossfire. The feminist in her also became aware of the huge conspiracy of silence…that enfolded the suffering of those considered to be of 'not much account' and therefore on the margins of citizenry: the women, the children, and the Harijans. (Butalia 118)

Notably, the first-phase literature is selective, as it focused more on Punjab and Bengal, leaving several regions undermapped in both memory and representation. Narratives of Sindhi migration, the dislocation of Sylhet into Assam, and the experiences of displaced populations in Bihar's camps are some of the overlooked dimensions of Partition history. Subsequently, these silences became important in the second phase, and it sought to excavate marginalized voices through oral history and feminist analysis.

On a condensing note, the first phase of Partition Literature echoes the issues of immediacy, testimony, and realism, and it is through works such as *Train to Pakistan*, *Tamas*, and Manto's short stories that the writers bear witness to violence and displacement, often at great personal cost. The first phase of Partition literature was marked by realism and had vivid portrayal of violence and bloodshed. However it is also important to notice that this phase of Partition Literature did not particularly talk about the experiences of women and subalterns. In the

second phase, these silences have been especially explored through feminist and subaltern interventions.

### The Second Phase: Memory, Gender, and the Everyday

The first phase of partition literature was being written while the violence of Partition was still going on in the country. Hence, writing and reading literature was being used to cope with the horror and ugliness of Partition. But literature of the second phase was written during comparatively peaceful times because of which it had the element of reflection. So, in this period, writers, scholars, and survivors undertake the task of narrating the events and interpreting them through the lens of memory, trauma, and social identity. Now that the pen was in the hands of the second generation, this phase of literature has started to focus towards the act of remembering and forgetting discussing about the everyday lives of the survivors of the violence of Partition.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) are reamarkable because these texts observe Partition from a distance which in turn, allows the readers to assess how memory works. These texts follow the longer ripples of Partition rather than recording and depicting the brutalities of Partition. *Midnight's Children* draws on magical realism to chart parallel evolution of a character and man. Through this blending of the fantastical with the historical, the novel shows how private memories and the country's political shifts remain deeply intertwined. In contrast, Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* turns inward focusing on the texture of everyday life. Partition does not appear as an explosive event; in fact it appears as a force that slowly alters relationships and reshapes recollections. Both these novels display a form of storytelling that foregrounds introspection.

The fact that the second phase of literature foregrounds gendered experience can be most evidently seen in Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (1999) which is a story about two women called Roop and Satya who go on to marry the same man. Like other works of the second phase of Partition Literature, this novel also intertwines the personal turmoils of the characters' lives with the collective histories. Baldwin highlights how trauma is transferred from one generation to another and manifests itself in the form of decisions, the silences and the restrictions that the women impose on themselves. This novel is a perfect blend of real historical events with intimate storytelling.

Fortunately, in this phase of Partition literature regional literatures was also on the rise. Because of which local perspectives were also coming to the front which prevented homogenization of the experiences of Partition. Works written in Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and Bengali shed light on how people of different communities were affected. One of the examples

for the same is *Basti* (1979) written by Intizar Hussain in Urdu. It is the story of Zakir, who moves from his childhood home to Lahore (Pakistan). This novel is significant because it is the story of a Muslim boy who have been a minority in India. The trauma that Zakir faces on the loss of his home is aptly depicted using folklore, myth and allegory in the novel. The title Basti over here itself has a deep symbolic meaning.

Another very important work talking about gendered violence that was published in the second phase of Partition Literature was Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Violence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998). It's a non-fiction work that combines stories of people who had first-hand suffered the violence of partition. The Other Side of Silence has testimonies of men, women, and children who faced communal violence, displacement, and loss of identities. It specifically talks about the experiences of women during Partition and the crimes carried out on them, like women's abduction and sexual violence. She has used memory, history, and trauma to undermine the importance of official accounts and to emphasize how a mere political event can have lasting psychological impacts on such a huge population.

Another example of the same is Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (1998), which is specifically a gendered critique on Partition. It draws our attention to the fact that the event of Partition was made even worse for the women of both countries. Officially it is estimated that 50,000 Muslim women in India and 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women in Pakistan were abducted (Menon and Bhasin 70). It showed how for the women, it was not just the division of land but the division of body, identity, and family. The text urged to view the event from women's perspective rather than the women's perspective being lost or generalized in the nationalist histories.

However, despite the introduction of new concerns and themes in the second phase of Partition Literature, there were still few writings that remembered and talked about the Partition as vividly as the writings of the first phase. The fact that Partition, even after so many years, continued to haunt the population of both the countries and that the writings that came out even after more than fifty years still talked about the horrors and the destruction that ensued can be understood by these lines that Gyanendra Pandey wrote in his work *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (2001):

> Stories of cruel attacks upon innocent Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in different parts of the subcontinent generated calls for vengeance all around. A letter written by a Hindu resident of Peshawar to the general secretary of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha in March 1947 reflects both the effect of these widely relayed stories and the consolidation of warring positions. The 'age of Aurangzeb' had returned to haunt them, the writer says, and the Hindus and Sikhs of northwestern India were living in terror 'like rats in a hole.' (Pandey 47)

The second phase of literature thus broadened the scope of Partition literature. Unlike the first phase, the second phase was more analytical, more interpretive and more reflective. This phase was responsible for establishing that women's experience of Partition was distinct than men's experience of Partition and that it needed a separate discourse. Writings that came out during this time blurred the boundaries between history, literature and anthropology. In spite of all this, this phase of literature lacks in certain ways such as it does not take into account diasporic experiences, or the perspectives of post-partition generations. These gaps are addressed in the third phase of Partition Literature which experiments in narrative forms, includes postmodern storytelling and talks about the emotional and psychological aftermath of Partition.

### The Third Phase: Transnationalism, Postmemory, and New Media

The third phase of Partition literature roughly starts from the beginning of twenty first century. While second phase of literature was more centred towards memory and testimony, the third wave is preoccupied with mediated remembrance: how Partition continues to shape cultural production even for those who never directly experienced it. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, which describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the trauma of those who came before. Hirsch defines postmemory in her book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture* (2012) as "experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up" (Hirsch 5). This is particularly relevant to partition studies, because it underscores that memory studies go beyond personal recollection and also investigate how personal and collective identities are formed.

Transnationalism is an important theme of the third phase of Partition Literature. Novels like Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988, but more widely studied in the 2000s) play with general understanding of borders, proving them to be arbitrary, psychological, or even imagined. The plot of the novel spans across different cities like London, Dhaka and Calcutta which explains that the impact of Partition was felt globally. Another work that has global reverberations is *Kartography* (2002) written by Shamila Kamsie is although about the partition of East Pakistan and West Pakistan that took place in 1971which led to the birth of Bangladesh but at certain points it also talks about the 1947 partition of India. Kartography as a text is quite specific to Pakistani context.

Another way in which the third phase of literature stands out is that it experiments in its forms of storytelling like films and graphic narratives. These forms make Partition literature more relatable and relevant for the current generation. One important work from this phase

is *This Side That Side: Restorying Partition* (2013), a graphic collection compiled by Vishwajyoti Ghosh which has contributions from artists and writers from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. It is a collection of different voices that revisit the Partition from different angles. When it comes to cinema, Deepa Mehta's *Earth* (1998) and *Viceroy's House* (2017) are strong examples of how visual storytelling continues to reinterpret Partition for modern viewers. Digitally, the project of *Partition Archive* (2010) is a huge success on the global level. Efforts like these in contemporary times successfully challenge state-centred historiographies. Moreover, films and projects like these provide easy access for the younger generation to access Partition stories in an interactive manner.

The third wave has also seen increased comparative and global approaches. Scholars like Ananya Jahanara Kabir advocate:

> The Holocaust and Partition share a basic similarity as epochal, limiting twentieth century events, but there are also basic dissimilarities between them and between their repercussions. While the similarities had drawn me to the term 'postmemory,' the divergences now compelled me to think of a new term. I came up with 'postamnesia.' Whereas postmemory signals the transmission of trauma through intergenerational forgetting. (Kabir 145)

What set the third wave of literature apart were its methodological and thematic reorientations, along with its chronological placement. Unlike the earlier waves, which were characterized by immediacy (first wave) and retrospective sociopolitical engagement (second wave), this phase is marked by the predominance of memory, cultural representation, and global circulation. Emerging in the 1990s, the third wave coincides with the 50th anniversary of Independence and Partition in 1997, an occasion that renewed public and scholarly interest in the events of 1947. This commemoration functions as a catalyst for writers, filmmakers, historians, and memory workers so as to revisit the ruptures of Partition through the lens of intergenerational and postmemory.

Saadia Faruqi's The Partition Project (2024) is a work that is meant for younger audiences, and it carries the perspective of a child protagonist who unravels his family history. It is a suitable example of the third phase of Partition Literature because it comes from a writer who did not live through 1947 but has grown up hearing fragments of that past. This distance allows Saadia Faruqi to look at Partition not as a historical wound that she personally experienced, but as something that continues to influence later generations. In the text, the reader can see how the rupture of Partition continues to shape ethical choices, silences, loyalties, and emotional inheritances across generations, encouraging the reader to reflect on the ideas of memory, justice, and empathy.

Aanchal Malhotra's *Remnants of Partition: 21 Objects from a Continent Divided* (2017) and In the *Language of Remembering: The Inheritance of Partition* (2022) are nonfiction works that fit in the third phase of Partition Literature because they explicitly engage in the intergenerational transmission of trauma. They talk about what Partition meant for the people who directly experienced it as well as for people of the later generation who later on inherited that trauma and those painful memories. Both the texts are a combination of personal narratives and oral histories to convey lived experiences as well as contemporary remembrance. In Remnants of Partition, objects are central to methodology because they are projected as carriers of memory, while in In the Language of Remembering, the author asserts that all of us live with an emotional residue of the Partition, which has been passed down to us through stories, silences, and emotions. Together, these texts exemplify postmemory, asserting how Partition's legacies live on.

Another significant text of the third phase of Partition literature is *Tomb of Sand* (2018) written by Gitanjali Shree. It is the story of an eighty-year old woman who suffers from depression on the death of her husband. Her attempts to cope with her mental health makes the readers question their understanding of tradition and modernity. This writing style can be an attempt to showcase trauma and memory in a more authentic way. The linguistic experimentation and fragmented storytelling used by the author give the reader multiple truths for them to deduce their own understanding. It foregrounds the intergenerational narratives in postcolonial India. It is not a story of Partition's violence but of its afterlife and how it continues to impact lives years later.

Borders and belonging are important aspects of the third phase of Partition Literature. The Long Partition and the *Making of South Asia* (2007) by Vazira Ahmad insists that Partition is actually a process that has shaped citizenship regimes, refugee policies, and everyday negotiations of identity. It is being studied how displacement reshaped geographies, landscapes, and environmental practices. Chattha states, "Partition and locality provide original and challenging insights into the processes of violence, demographic transformation, and physical reconstruction arising from the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947" (Chattha, 14). This spatial consciousness resonates with broader postcolonial studies, which link Partition to other global histories of displacement and border making.

To summarize the third phase of literature, it resembled the earlier phases of literature as it continued the project of testimony and remembrance, which was greatly seen in the second phase of literature, but it is also uniquely relevant to its own times as it reframes the Partition literature within global circuits of diaspora, transnationalism, and intergenerational perspectives. By using newer media like films, graphic fiction, and digital archiving, the third

phase of literature, this phase proves that Partition was not just a geopolitical event but a living discourse whose haunting presence continues to shape South Asian identity and politics.

### Conclusion

To conclude, Partition literature can be categorized into three phases which show how memory and trauma can travel across generations. With each phase, new generation of writers had different concerns to address regarding the same event. The earliest works were born out of the shock of living through the event, while later writers had a more reflective stance towards Partition to see its emotional and social side-effects. The later phases of Partition Literature brought newer voices and creative forms, bringing attention to how the later generations are affected by the event of Partition who were only exposed to it by family stories and historical accounts. Together, these three phases prove that Partition is not just an event of the past but it still lives and breathes among us and continues to impact and influence our lives in some way or the other. The ongoing engagement with the Partition in the form of literature helps us to reconcilliate with its memory and heal the trauma associated with it.

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