

Lines on Land, Scars in Memory: Narrative Representations of Trauma and Violence in Punjab Partition Literature

Savita Grover

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Asstt. Professor (English), Panjab
University SSG Regional Centre,
Hoshiarpur.
Email: savitagrover12@gmail.com

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Address for correspondence:
Savita Grover,
Asstt. Professor (English), Panjab
University SSG Regional Centre,
Hoshiarpur.
Email: savitagrover12@gmail.com

Abstract

The present research project examines the enduring imprint of trauma and violence in the literary representations of the Partition of India, with a particular focus on Punjab – both as a geographical and psychological landscape of rupture. While the decision of drawing lines of border is entirely political - the impact it has on civil life can prove to be highly devastating. The primary texts of study shall be Partition Literature from Punjab - *Train to Pakistan*, *Tamas*, *Pinjar*, *Ice Candy Man*, and *Khol Do*— all narratives of different lengths. However, the idea behind such variety in lengths of texts is to explore how narratives construct, mediate, and memorialize experiences of displacement, communal violence, and fractured identities - some in the form of long stories and others as short pondering stories - all move beyond mere historical recounting instead of foregrounding the intimate, embodied dimensions of trauma. Through recurring motifs such as 'trains', 'borders', 'abducted bodies', and 'silenced voices' - these texts reveal how violence infiltrates everyday life and reshapes memory. Punjab emerges not only as a site of physical division but also as a symbolic terrain where personal and collective histories collide.

By employing diverse narrative strategies - ranging from stark realism to allegory and fragmented storytelling - these authors articulate the unspeakable horrors of Partition while resisting closure. The study highlights how sexual violence, particularly in *Pinjar* and *Khol Do*, becomes central to understanding the politics of honor, nationhood, and the female body as a contested space. Meanwhile, *Train to Pakistan* and *Tamas* interrogate the moral ambiguities of communal identities, and *Ice Candy Man* offers a child's perspective that underscores the loss of innocence amidst chaos.

Ultimately, this paper situates Punjab Partition literature within the broader framework of trauma studies, emphasizing how storytelling functions as both a witness to and a means of processing historical catastrophe. The 'lines' drawn on land during Partition continue to reverberate as painful 'scars' in cultural memory, and these literary texts serve as vital archives of pain, resilience, and the struggle to remember.

Keyword: Partition Literature, Trauma, Violence, Memory, Punjab Partition, Displacement, Narrative Representation, Collective Memory, Identity, Border Studies

Introduction

Coming from the lineage of displaced families from the Pakpattan region of West Punjab (Lehnda Panjab) in Pakistan, I grew up listening to the horrendous recounts of displacement and the loss of loved ones - as narrated by my grandparents, uncles and aunts. These stories not only reflect the rich heritage of my ancestral family but also bear witness to the unimaginable tragedies they endured during the tumultuous division of India along political lines in 1947. Nearly five decades after partition, my grandmother passed away in August 1996 – still holding onto the hope that she might one day return to her *haveli* in Pakistan. She longed to recover a buried bag containing gold ornaments and silver coins gifted to her by her mother at the time of her wedding. More than that, she yearned to retrieve the only photograph of her beloved sister, who drowned while crossing the River Sutlej en route to Fazilka region of Punjab – This is not merely the story of my family but similar accounts still echo through countless homes across Punjab, where memories of loss, longing, and resilience continue to endure.

As we approach the 80th anniversary of India's independence in 2027, the memory of the Partition continues to cast a long and painful shadow. It remains one of the most harrowing chapters of that era – an event that irrevocably altered the course of countless lives. As one of the most catastrophic and defining moments in modern South Asian history – the partition of India remains marked by large-scale communal violence, forced mass displacement, and deep, enduring psychological scars that continue to resonate across generations. Punjab, located at the epicentre of this division, emerged as a profoundly wounded, cultural and geographical space where borders were not only drawn on maps but inscribed violently onto the bodies, memory, and identity of its residents.

However, Partition cannot be understood solely as a historical rupture; it is also a continuing memory regime shaped by literature, oral testimony, archival silences, and state historiographies. In recent Partition studies, scholars such as Marianne Hirsch have emphasized that traumatic histories persist through “postmemory”, where subsequent generations inherit fragmented, affective memories of events they did not directly experience.

This paper examines how trauma and violence are ‘narrativized’ in five canonical texts: *Train to Pakistan*, *Tamas*, *Pinjar*, *Ice-Candy-Man*, and *Khol Do*. The study argues that these texts do not merely represent Partition violence but also actively construct competing memory regimes through narrative fragmentation, ethical ambiguity, and embodied trauma. The selected texts belong to both sides of Punjab (East and West Punjab).

Crucially, this paper revises earlier limitations by integrating postmemory theory, narratological precision, and gendered agency frameworks, thereby, situating Partition literature as a multi-layered archive of historical, psychological, and cultural trauma.

This study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology - combining close textual analysis, narratology, trauma theory, post memory studies, feminist theory, and postcolonial critique. Unlike purely thematic approaches, this study emphasizes how meaning is produced through narrative form, focalization, and temporal disruption.

Trauma, Memory and Postmemory

Cathy Caruth, defines trauma as “the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” (Caruth 3). Caruth’s model of belatedness and repetition is useful in explaining how Partition violence returns in fragmented narrative forms. Though the collected memory of trauma caused due to the communal and historical differences can not be limited to the western psychoanalytic methods as “acting out is the compulsive repetition of the traumatic scene; working through involves a critical engagement with it” (LaCapra 21). Partition narratives often oscillate between these modes, but the study extends LaCapra’s model by incorporating collective memory transmission beyond individual psyche. Maurice Halbwachs argues that “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories” (Halbwachs 38). Building on this, Pierre Nora’s *Lieux de mémoire* conceptualizes memory as embedded in symbolic sites such as trains, villages, and borders. Critically extending memory theory, this paper foregrounds Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, where postmemory is mediated memory that is “transmitted so deeply and affectively that it seems to constitute memories in its own right.” (Hirsch 103). This is particularly significant for Partition literature, which constructs trauma for readers who are temporally distant from 1947 but emotionally implicated in its aftermath. This research paper employs narratological tools to analyze:

- Focalization (who sees?)
- Narrative voice (who speaks?)
- Temporal disruption (how time is structured?)
- Silence and ellipsis (what is omitted?)

Postcolonial Framework and Memory Politics

From a postcolonial perspective, Partition is understood as a politically engineered rupture shaped by colonial governance. Homi K. Bhabha notes - “Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power” (Bhabha 112). However, this study expands postcolonial analysis by incorporating memory politics, arguing that Partition memory is not neutral but actively shaped by:

- Nationalist Historiography
- State Archives
- Selective Remembrance
- Educational Narratives

Thus, literature becomes a counter-archive resisting institutional erasure where each character, each narrative plays an important role in curating a mode or fight for survival and resistance. The children and women in these narratives are not just the victims of violence, chaos and displacement but are also active negotiators of identity, memory, and survival. The selected texts are embodiments of the zeal to survive in the one of the most chaotic times in the history of India.

The novel “*Train to Pakistan*” portrays the 1947 partition as a brutal collapse of the communal harmony while law fails to protect the guileless ordinary people from the wrath of the times. Violence becomes the new normal in the new India after partition in 1947 – how friends from other religion became enemies and how ordinary men and women become symbols of structural catastrophe. Violence is narrativized as intruder into the ordinary lives in the pastoral world of *Mano Majra*, transforming it into a microcosm of Partition trauma. The train, described as “a ghost train” (Singh 74), symbolizes the transformation of modern mobility into mechanized death. It emerges as a transregional symbol of both connection and annihilation as it carries “corpses... silence was louder than screams” (Singh 101). The train functions as what trauma theorists call a repetition structure, returning throughout narratives as a site of unresolved memory. Here, the narrative’s omniscient focalization allows readers to observe violence as both intimate and systemic.

In *Tamas*, violence is structurally produced through rumor and state manipulation: “Rumors spread like wildfire, and fear became a weapon more dangerous than swords” (Sahni 56). Here, Sahni while employing episodic narration - reflects the fragmentation of social order rather than linear historical progression.

In *Ice-Candy-Man*, violence is mediated through child focalization. Lenny's perception: "One day everybody is themselves—and the next they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian" (Sidhwa 93) - reveals identity as performative and unstable rather than essential.

Lines on Border : Scars in Memory

Borders, particularly the Radcliffe Line, function as what this study terms "violent cartographies"—spaces where geography becomes psychological rupture. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, Lahore is described as the city that "was divided overnight. Streets became wounds" (Sidhwa 112). This metaphor illustrates how space itself becomes corporealized trauma. Innocent men, women and children became victims of the unimaginable trauma and violence. It is often said that during turbulent political times, whether it be a war on border or a civil war – it is always the women and the children who bear the brunt of the times. The Gendered trauma becomes a symbol of violence and irrevocable memory – a scarred memory that questions the very existence of the victim. In *Pinjar*, Puro's abduction represents identity fragmentation where she was robbed of her "name, my home, my God" (Pritam 45). In *Khol Do*, Sakina's trauma is embodied when her "hands moved mechanically" (Manto 62). In *Ice-Candy-Man*, Ayah's abduction when "the crowd swallowed her" (Sidhwa 147) – brings forth the horrible memory of collective violence, where specific genders are targeted and erased of their identity altogether.

The memories of the violence and trauma are imbued in such manner that the body remembers even when mind is unconscious as reflected in *Khol Do*. The body of Sakina remembered the trauma of rape rather than her conscious thought – a stark representation of somatic memory. Puro goes beyond her victimhood and attempts to reconstruct her identity. She navigates survival beyond abduction, challenging earlier readings that reduce her to victimhood. The collective violence in *Ice-Candy-Man* highlights the gendered economy of visibility and erasure when Ayah is abducted to be never found again.

Trauma disrupts narrative continuity, producing fragmentation and silence. Caruth's theory of belated trauma is evident in all texts, but narratological analysis reveals distinct techniques. *Tamas* is an episodic fragmentation that reflects social disintegration while the minimalist narration in *Khol Do* intensifies ethical shock - "There was nothing left to say" (Manto 63). The internal focalization in *Pinjar* reflects psychological exile - "I no longer knew where I belonged" (Pritam 88). The silence in these texts functions not as absence but as overloaded meaning, where language fails under historical pressure. The ethical collapse of the Ice-Candy-Man (Dil Nawaz) who admired the Hindu Ayah (Shanta) prior to partition but later turned radicalised and kidnapped her -marks an end to childhood security of Lenny – a Parsi girl. This is a stark representation of moral ambiguity when love turned into hatred.

Thus, partition literature resists moral binaries. In *Train to Pakistan*, Juggut Singh's sacrifice when he cuts "the rope knowing he would die" (Singh 164) - disrupts communal determinism and introduces ethical agency within violence. In *Tamas*, violence is distributed across communities, suggesting that brutality is structurally rather than religiously determined. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, transformation is central: "He smiled even as the city burned" (Sidhwa 173) - indicating radicalization through structural chaos rather than inherent evil.

Memory, Testimony, and Counter-Archives

These texts function as counter-archival narratives, challenging nationalist historiographies. Testimony is not only representation but also ethical reconstruction of memory systems - a mode of "bearing witness to what resists full representation" (LaCapra 85). Importantly, this study integrates postmemory theory, showing that readers themselves become participants in inherited trauma structures. The aftershock, the pain the readers feel on reading the harrowing experiences of the characters testify a shared memory that agrees to these accounts as narrated in the partition literatures – lines on borders leave scathing scars in the collective memories of the public.

Conclusion

The literature of the Partition of India constructs trauma not as a past event but as an ongoing cultural condition. Through *Train to Pakistan*, *Tamas*, *Pinjar*, *Ice-Candy-Man*, and *Khol Do*, trauma is not only represented but formally encoded into narrative structures. By addressing these texts through postmemory theory, narratological precision, and expanded gender analysis - this study demonstrates that Partition literature functions as a multidirectional memory system, where history, fiction, and affect converge. Ultimately, the "lines on land" drawn in 1947 persist as "scars in memory," continuously reactivated through storytelling, transmission, and reading. The political lines of border have proven to be highly devastating experience for civil life across these borders. Partition literature from Punjab thus remains not only a record of catastrophe but a living archive of unresolved history of the 1947 partition.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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