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The Partition of India in 1947: Applying Psychological Theories to Literary Narratives

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Abstract:

The Partition of India in 1947, which led to the creation of the independent nations of India and Pakistan, was one of the most defining and traumatic events of the 20th century. The division of the Indian subcontinent along religious lines resulted in the displacement of over 10 million people and the deaths of between 2,00,000 and 2 million individuals in the communal violence that erupted (Butalia, 2000). The trauma and human suffering caused by the Partition has had a lasting impact on the psyche of the people of the Indian subcontinent, echoing through generations and finding expression in a vast body of literary works.

These literary narratives, ranging from novels, short stories, memoirs, and poetry, provide a window into the psychological dimensions of the Partition experience. By examining these texts through the lens of psychological theories, we can gain deeper insights into the individual and collective psyche of those impacted by this cataclysmic event. This research paper will explore how various psychological frameworks, including trauma theory, identity theory, and collective memory, can be applied to analyze literary representations of the Partition.

Keywords: partition, traumatic events, subcontinent, psychological frameworks.

Trauma Theory and the Partition Narrative

One of the most prominent psychological theories that can be applied to the study of Partition literature is trauma theory. The Partition, with its widespread displacement, violence, and rupturing of social and familial ties, undoubtedly caused immense psychological trauma for those who experienced it. Literary works that grapple with the Partition experience often reflect the symptoms and impacts of this trauma.

Cathy Caruth's influential work on trauma theory provides a useful framework for examining Partition narratives. Caruth (1996) conceptualizes trauma as an "overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (p. 11). This definition captures the way in which the Partition, as a shattering historical event, manifests in the psyches of survivors through flashbacks, nightmares, and other intrusive memories that disrupt the normal flow of consciousness.

Many Partition novels, such as Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* (1988), depict characters who are haunted by the violence and losses they experienced during the Partition. In *Train to Pakistan*, the protagonist Juggat Singh is tormented by the memory of witnessing the brutal murder of his friend, an event that continues to haunt him long after the Partition (Singh, 1956). Similarly, in *Ice-Candy Man*, the narrator Lenny struggles to come to terms with the trauma of seeing her beloved nanny Shanta brutalized and abducted during the riots (Sidhwa, 1988). These intrusive, uncontrolled memories reflect the psychological impact of the Partition trauma on the individuals.

Caruth (1996) further posits that trauma is characterized by a temporal gap between the event and the victim's response to it. This "belatedness" is evident in many Partition narratives, where characters only later realize the full extent of the trauma they endured. For instance, in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *American Brat* (1993), the protagonist Feroza, who was a child during the Partition, gradually comes to understand the depth of her family's suffering as she grows older



and gains more perspective. This delayed, gradual comprehension of the trauma aligns with Caruth's conceptualization.

Beyond individual trauma, the Partition also gave rise to a collective trauma shared by the people of the Indian subcontinent. As Kai Erikson (1995) argues, catastrophic events can create a "shared fate" that binds a community together in their suffering. The Partition, with its massive upheaval and violence, undoubtedly resulted in such a collective trauma that continues to reverberate through the cultural psyche of the region.

This collective trauma is reflected in the recurring motifs and themes that emerge across Partition literature. Metaphors of rupture, displacement, and the fragmentation of identity are ubiquitous, signifying the collective wounding experienced by the people. Novels such as Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) explore how the Partition shattered familial and community bonds, leaving individuals struggling to rebuild a sense of self and belonging.

Furthermore, the proliferation of narratives that focus on the trauma of women during the Partition, such as Mirza Waheed's *The Book of Gold Leaves* (2014) and Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (1999), suggests the ways in which gendered violence became a central aspect of the collective trauma. These texts shed light on how women's bodies became the battleground for communal tensions, with rape, abduction, and forced conversion emerging as tools of terror and control.

By examining Partition literature through the lens of trauma theory, we can thus gain a deeper understanding of how this cataclysmic event left an indelible mark on the psyches of those who experienced it, both at the individual and collective levels. The recurring motifs of fragmentation, displacement, and the disruption of identity in these works reflect the profound psychological wounds inflicted by the Partition.

Identity Theory and the Partition Narrative

Another crucial psychological framework that can illuminate the Partition experience as expressed in literary narratives is identity theory. The Partition, with its redrawing of national

and religious boundaries, fundamentally challenged and destabilized the identities of those caught in the upheaval.

Social identity theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, provides a useful lens for analyzing how the Partition impacted individual and group identities. This theory posits that individuals derive a sense of self and belonging from the social groups to which they belong, and that these group identities are central to an individual's self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The Partition, by forcibly dividing communities and separating individuals from their traditional social ties, disrupted these identity-forming group affiliations.

Many Partition novels grapple with the crisis of identity experienced by their protagonists in the wake of this seismic event. Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, for instance, follows the protagonist Laila as she struggles to reconcile her Muslim identity with her liberal, Anglicized upbringing in a zamindari family. The Partition forces Laila to confront the fracturing of her identity, as she finds herself caught between the competing demands of her family, her faith, and the newly formed nation-state of Pakistan (Hosain, 1961).

Similarly, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* explores how the Partition's redrawing of borders disrupts the narrator's sense of personal and familial identity. The protagonist, also named Amitav, is born after the Partition but grapples with the legacy of the event through his relationships with his aunt Mayadebi and her childhood friend Ila, whose lives were irrevocably changed by the division of India and Bangladesh. The novel highlights how the Partition's destruction of established social and geographic ties forced individuals to renegotiate their identities in the face of profound upheaval.

The trauma of displacement and dislocation experienced by Partition refugees also had a significant impact on their sense of identity. Uprooted from their ancestral homes and communities, these individuals were compelled to rebuild their lives in unfamiliar surroundings, often struggling to maintain a coherent sense of self. Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice-Candy Man* poignantly depicts the plight of Partition refugees, such as the character of Shanta, whose abduction and forced conversion during the riots leaves her irrevocably altered, severed from her previous identity.



Beyond individual identity, the Partition also resulted in the construction of new, often contested national and religious identities in the form of India and Pakistan. The process of nation-building in the aftermath of Partition was fraught with tensions, as the newly formed states sought to forge a unified national consciousness out of the diverse, sometimes conflicting, social and cultural identities that had previously coexisted within the larger framework of British India.

This dynamic is explored in Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (1981), which uses the device of the "midnight's children" - individuals born at the exact moment of India's independence - to allegorically represent the complex interplay of individual, communal, and national identities in the post-Partition era. The novel highlights how the construction of Indian and Pakistani national identities involved the suppression or assimilation of various minority and regional identities, leading to ongoing tensions and conflicts.

By engaging with identity theory, we can thus gain valuable insights into how the Partition, as a transformative historical event, fundamentally challenged and reshaped the individual and collective identities of those caught in its wake. The literary narratives of the Partition provide a rich tapestry for exploring these identity-related dynamics, illuminating the profound psychological impact of this cataclysmic event.

Collective Memory and the Partition Narrative

In addition to trauma theory and identity theory, the concept of collective memory also offers a productive lens for analyzing Partition literature. Collective memory, as theorized by scholars such as Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, refers to the shared memories and narratives that bind a community or society together, shaping their collective understanding of the past and their sense of identity in the present (Halbwachs, 1992, Nora, 1989).

The Partition, as a seminal event in the history of the Indian subcontinent, has given rise to a rich tapestry of collective memories that have been transmitted and negotiated through various cultural and literary forms. These collective memories of the Partition serve to anchor individual and communal identities, while also reflecting the ongoing struggles to come to terms with the trauma of this event.

Many Partition novels engage directly with the task of preserving and transmitting collective memories of the Partition. Novels such as Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1974) are structured around the recollection and retelling of Partition experiences, with the authors drawing on their own memories and those of their communities to construct a cohesive narrative of this historical moment.

These works often employ techniques of oral storytelling and the incorporation of multiple, sometimes conflicting, perspectives to capture the complexity and fluidity of collective memory. In *Train to Pakistan*, for instance, the narrative shifts between the viewpoints of different characters, each offering their own recollection of the events leading up to and during the Partition (Singh, 1956). This polyphonic approach reflects the ways in which collective memories of the Partition are not monolithic, but rather multivocal and constantly evolving.

Furthermore, the proliferation of Partition memoirs and autobiographical accounts, such as Attia Hosain's *Phoenix Fled* (1953) and Saadat Hasan Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" (1955), further contribute to the collective memory of this event. These personal narratives provide intimate, first-hand accounts that complement and enrich the collective understanding of the Partition, lending it a sense of authenticity and immediacy.

At the same time, the collective memories of the Partition are also shaped by the political and ideological agendas of the present. As Pierre Nora (1989) argues, collective memory is always mediated by the concerns and perspectives of the contemporary moment. In the context of the Partition, we can observe how the dominant nationalist narratives of India and Pakistan have sought to appropriate and instrumentalize the collective memories of this event to serve their own nation-building projects.

For instance, the Partition is often framed in the nationalist imagination as a moment of heroic struggle and sacrifice, with the violence and trauma of the event downplayed or obscured. Novels that challenge this sanitized, heroic narrative, such as Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*, which depicts the brutal realities of communal violence, have sometimes faced censorship or backlash, highlighting the contested nature of Partition memories.

By engaging with the concept of collective memory, we can thus recognize the Partition novel as a site of ongoing negotiation and struggle over the meaning and legacy of this pivotal



historical event. The literary representations of the Partition reflect the ways in which individual and communal memories are woven into a broader, shared understanding of the past, while also highlighting the ideological and political dimensions that shape these collective memories.

Conclusion

The Partition of India in 1947 was a cataclysmic event that left an indelible mark on the psyche of the people of the Indian subcontinent. The vast body of literary narratives that have emerged in the decades since the Partition provide a rich tapestry for exploring the psychological dimensions of this historical trauma.

Through the lens of psychological theories such as trauma theory, identity theory, and collective memory, we can gain deeper insights into how the Partition experience has been expressed, negotiated, and transmitted in literary form. These theoretical frameworks illuminate the ways in which the Partition disrupted individual and collective psyches, challenged established identities, and gave rise to a complex web of shared memories and narratives.

By engaging with Partition literature through these psychological lenses, we can better understand the profound and lasting impact of this event, and the ongoing struggle of individuals and communities to come to terms with its legacy. The literary representations of the Partition offer a powerful testament to the enduring resilience and creativity of the human spirit in the face of unimaginable upheaval and suffering.

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