

Gender, Memory, Trauma: Women's Novels on the Partition of India

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There are certain images from my past which have always haunted me. Partition was a very violent experience for everybody in the Punjab. Although I was very young then, I saw chance killings, fires, dead bodies. There are images which have stayed with me. These were also the stories I grew up with.

—Bapsi Sidhwa, “My Place in the World”

I wrote *Zindaginama* (“A Life Chronicle”) thirty years after the Partition, even though I had made the first draft in 1952. Time is a strange chemistry. First we wanted to forget and then we wanted to relive the time that was!

—Krishna Sobti, “Memory and History of Partition”

Writing from opposite sides of the “Great Divide” created by the partition of 1947, these two authors from Pakistan and India, Bapsi Sidhwa and Krishna Sobti, respectively, seem separated by more than nationality. Sobti writes in Hindi, Sidhwa in English: Sobti writes as a Punjabi Hindu who left Pakistan for India in the aftermath of partition, Sidhwa as a Parsi who stayed behind in Pakistan and subsequently moved to America. They belong, furthermore, to different generations (if we measure generation by the yardstick of distance from a critical event): Sidhwa is one of the “Midnight’s Children” generation, a writer who while not born in August 1947 was but a child at that moment, while Sobti, who was then twenty-seven years old, represents an older generation of partition survivors.

Despite these differences, there is much that they share, and my epigraphs capture this shared territory. Both Sidhwa and Sobti are authors of partition narratives: narrative representations of the events leading up to, culminating in, and constituting the immediate aftermath of the partition of India. Both are women who have written novels, from an upper-middle-class perspective, about women whose lives were deeply affected by partition. In their choice of subject matter and narrative form, both respond to partition as a traumatic event. Sidhwa’s reference to images that have “haunted” her from childhood and Sobti’s acknowledgment of the twin demands of forgetting and remembrance suggest a self-imposed authorial task of negotiating between traumatic recall and narrative commemoration, and between different kinds of memory that inhabit and fragment not only nations and communities but also the

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subjectivities of the individuals who comprise these large identity-groups.

The consequences of partition have been explored by authors writing in all the major South Asian languages and all major narrative and lyric genres—poetry, short stories, novels, film, and television serials. Here I draw on one kind of partition narrative—novels by women authors from India, Pakistan, and the South Asian diaspora, in English, Hindi, and Urdu, and representing different generations.¹ These various authors enable us to explore the relationship between gender, memory, and trauma as manifested within two specific contexts: the postcolonial South Asian context and the context of the novel as an art form. First, I discuss why we should consider partition as collective trauma and outline the different ways in which the event has been remembered, allowing different groups to forge new bonds and solidarities as well as relinquish old ties. Second, I use some partition novels written by women to excavate the gendered dimension of such memory-work. I focus on how the sociocultural positions of the authors relate to questions of form: the temporal scope offered by the novel; a realist narrative technique; the relationship between author and narrator; the moments of thick description that interrupt narrative flow; the tropes that structure the narrative.

Analysis suggests that these novels function very much as testimonial narratives do for survivors of the Holocaust: they provide a means for the narrative integration of traumatic memory, thereby opening up possibilities for mourning and reconciliation. The cultural and formal specificities that shape their testimonial and recuperative function confirm Paul Antze's view that, for a full understanding of the relationship between trauma and memory, "comparisons with non-European societies are vital in order to reveal the outlines of cultural tropes

and social forms that can serve to conceal or highlight memories and legitimate specific versions of the past."² At the same time, their gendered lens offers a paradigm for all narratives that construct countermemories to official memorialization of the partition (or lack thereof). However, do such countermemories, and the mourning work of individuals that they signal, have any possibility of reentering the public domain today to impact larger groups, or are they ever more excluded by the contemporary ideological climate in South Asia? A coda to this article assesses this question.

Don't Look, Just Run: Partition as Cultural Trauma

The freedom struggle in colonial India resulted in the creation of not one but two new nations with the departure of the British in August 1947. Based on the "Two-Nation Theory," or the argument that Hindus and Muslims could not live together as one nation because they comprised, in fact, two separate entities with opposing interests, the Muslim League demanded the partition of the subcontinent into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India. The Muslim majority regions of Punjab and Bengal were divided, with west Punjab and east Bengal forming West and East Pakistan and India sandwiched in the middle.³ This entailed a massive and violent transfer of population as Sikhs and Hindus from regions that were now in Pakistan moved into India, and Muslims moved in the opposite direction. Muslim families from regions in northern India that were not partitioned also migrated to Pakistan, in hope of a better future and in fear of stigmatized lives in the new India. As a result, a million people were left dead and at least seventy-five thousand women raped and abandoned; about twelve million people were displaced; countless homes were abandoned or destroyed; properties, families, and cultures were divided as new, often contentious national

1. For a (somewhat dated) survey, see Ian Talbot, *Freedom's Cry: The Popular Dimension in the Pakistan Movement and Partition Experience in North-West India* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 195–53. See also Arjun Mahey, "Partition Narratives: Some Observations," in *Translating Partition: Stories by Atia Hosain*, ed. Ravikant and Tarun K. Saint (New Delhi: Katha, 2001). The fiftieth anniversary of India and Pakistan's independence also sparked a number

of anthologies of partition writing in or translated into English. See, for example, Mushirul Hasan, ed., *India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom*, 2 vols. (Delhi: Roli, 1995); and Alok Bhalla, ed., *Stories about the Partition of India*, 3 vols. (New Delhi: Indus, 1994).

2. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, eds., *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (New York: Routledge, 1996), xiv.

3. For the historiography supporting these statements, see, for instance, Mushirul Hasan, *India's Partition, Process, Strategy, Mobilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

borders were drawn over older ethnic and linguistic identities.⁴

Most obviously, for a great many people the event was traumatic in the original sense of the Greek word *trauma*: an injury inflicted on the body. Yet the breaking through of the most basic human boundary, the skin, goes beyond the corporeal. The starting point of power relationships predicated on violence, it brings us to the psychoanalytic sense of trauma as “the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self and the world.”⁵ The violence of partition comprised both physical and psychological wounding, with the physical wound bound up with aspects of somatically marked cultural identity. For men, bodily symbols of religious affiliation—circumcision or its absence, uncut hair of Sikh males—exposed their bearers to life-threatening violence. But, as in other moments of collective violence, it was in the systematic rape of women that trauma and the body were most obviously linked. Women were raped and mutilated during the mayhem of partition because their female bodies provided a “space over which the competitive games of men were played out,”⁶ whereby Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim men sought to humiliate and annihilate the “other” while imprinting their own identity on the bearer of future generations.

The combination of physical violation with physical dislocation during partition means that not just the body, but also the body’s place in the world, became a site of trauma. Veena Das aptly comments that “consequent to this violence in which the most interior aspects of life were the most intruded upon, fleeing to another alien space led to a division of the self and the world according to a logic that made the self radically fugitive and the world radically fragmented.”⁷ As writers such as Ismat Chughtai and Sadat Hasan Manto (to name but two)

powerfully testify, men and women alike shared this fragmented and fugitive postpartition reality, just as men and women alike were subjected to communal violence. I would suggest, however, that the female experience of violence, dislocation, and reintegration offers a paradigm for the fracturing of identities and the consequent insecurities and disorientations of different groups in both India and Pakistan—groups of those who were displaced as well as of those who were left behind.⁸

A good example of this gendering of flight is the extended prologue to Sobti’s *Zindaginama*. This novel, which is a nostalgic recreation of life in a prepartition Punjabi village, begins with a long lyric eulogy to the Punjab itself, initially described as a breast-feeding mother and subsequently evoked through detailed references to its “syncretistic folk culture.” Returning to the image of breast-feeding Punjab, Sobti laments that “today from its milk-heavy breasts drips not milk but blood.” The remainder of the eulogy speaks of flight and farewell:

Don’t look
Just run
Just leave
These waters
This earth
. . . Goodbye
To the water of waters
To the Punjab of five waters
To Jhelum’s and Chenab’s waters
Goodbye
To the memory of one’s ancestors
The children of whose blood and milk
Will never again play
Never again play
With this earth.⁹

Images of feminine fecundity combine with images of flight to recall Das’s ethnographic analysis of women’s resource to domestic imagery—

4. These “facts” and “statistics,” along with their attendant stories, have only recently begun to enter the public domain, in no small measure thanks to a number of feminist and subaltern ethnohistories and anthropological studies on partition: some landmarks are Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon, *Borders and Boundaries: Women’s Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Kali for

Women, 1998); and Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1998).

5. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3–4.

6. Veena Das, “Composition of the Personal Voice: Violence and Migration,” *Studies in History*, n.s., 7 (1991): 69.

7. *Ibid.*, 65.

8. I have elaborated this point elsewhere; see Ananya Jahanara Kabir, “Subjectivities, Memories, Loss: Of Pigskin Bags, Silver Spittoons, and the Partition of India,” *Interventions* 4 (2002): 245–64.

9. Krishna Sobti, *Zindaginama* (Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1979), 14–15 (translations from Hindi are mine).

such as fleeing the *chulha* (stove) without even covering the head—in recounting how they had left their homes during partition.¹⁰

For Sobti, as for many other writers, flight from the ancestral home is equated with flight from aspects of Punjabi culture that are lost forever after partition, and later in the article I discuss in more detail the gendered inflections of this conflation. The psychological repercussions of partition were thus registered on the cultural as well as personal level: to be more specific, they were registered within the space where the personal meets the cultural. From this perspective, it seems most appropriate to describe partition as *cultural trauma*. Ron Eyerman, working on African American identity, distinguishes between “psychological or physical trauma, which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual,” and “cultural trauma, [which] refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion.”¹¹ As a cultural process, trauma’s impact is twofold and contradictory: on the one hand, it damages the “tissues of a community,”¹² but, on the other, it “is linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory.”¹³ The partition of India fits these criteria: it tore the social fabric that had woven regional communities and groups together and demanded new ways of thinking about the self in relation to society.

Historians would correctly argue that these processes began during the nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries rather than suddenly coming into being during 1947.¹⁴ My emphasis, however, is on how different groups *remembered* these processes vis-à-vis “a limiting event” such as partition.¹⁵ How was the memory of partition integrated into ways of thinking of oneself as a group member—be that affiliation religious (Hindu vs. Muslim vs. Sikh); ethnic (Punjabi vs. Bengali vs. Muhajir vs. Kashmiri); national (Indian vs. Pakistani); or gendered (man vs. woman)?¹⁶ What happened when different groups within and across nations in South Asia, as well as in the South Asian diaspora, laid claim to, or rejected, the memory of partition, in different and competing ways? Reading partition as cultural trauma provides us with useful analytic tools with which to answer these questions. We can thereby clarify how the effects of partition “leaked” beyond the immediate moment, both vertically, affecting the children of survivors, as well as laterally, spreading across groups to include those of its members who themselves have not been affected physically.¹⁷

Let the Sparrow Struggle with the Hawk: Trauma, Memory, Narrative

In British author Meera Syal’s autobiographical novel *Anita and Me*, the narrative of a Punjabi girl growing up in an English mining village is interrupted at one point by memories of partition.¹⁸ One evening, the protagonist, Meena, overhears a violent and emotional discussion between her parents and their friends:

10. Das, “Composition of the Personal Voice,” 68–69. For similar quotations from other partition survivors, see Suvir Kaul, introduction to *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, ed. Suvir Kaul (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 6.

11. Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.

12. Kai Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 185.

13. Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*, 1.

14. See Ayesha Jalal, Mushirul Hasan, and Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), among others.

15. Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 47.

16. Some of these questions are explored by Dipesh Chakravarty, “Remembered Villages: Representations of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of Partition,” *South Asia* 18 (1995): 109–29; and Mukulika Bannerjee, “Partition and the North West Frontier: Memories of Some Khudai Khidmatgars,” and Joya Chatterji, “Right or Charity? The Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947–50,” both in Kaul, *Partitions of Memory*. See also the essays in *Region and Partition: Bengal, Punjab, and the Partition of the Subcontinent*, ed. Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

17. For lateral transmission of trauma, see Laura S. Brown, “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma,” in Caruth, *Trauma*; for vertical or transgenerational transmission of trauma, see Yolanda Gampel, “Reflections on the Prevalence of the Uncanny in Social Violence,” in *Cultures under Siege: Collective Violence and Trauma*, ed. Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and note 20 below.

18. Meera Syal, *Anita and Me* (London: Flamingo, 1996).

It was my Uncle Bhatnagar shouting. . . . “But it was a damn massacre!” he was spluttering, and then he talked in Punjabi of which I recognised a few words, “family . . . money . . . death” and then, “they talk about their world wars. . . . We lost a million people! And who thought of Partition? These ‘gores,’ that’s who!” Then everyone launched in, the whispers squeezed through the gap in the door and I could make out familiar voices saying such terrible and alien things.

“My mother and I, the Hindus marched us through the streets . . . our heads uncovered. . . .” That must have been Auntie Mumtaz, one of our few Muslim friends. “They wanted to do such things to us. . . .” There was a long pause, I thought I heard someone sniff. “All the time we were walking, mama and I, papa was lying dead, his head cut from his body. They found it later lying in the fallen jasmine blooms. . . .”

“We all have these stories, bhainji,” Uncle Bhatnagar again, addressing her as sister. “What was happening to you was also happening to us. None of us could stop it, Mad people everywhere.” There was a murmur of consensus. Subdued, fearful maybe because of all the old wounds being reopened. “We were on the wrong side of the border also when the news came, none of us knew until that moment if we would be going or staying. My whole family, we walked from Syalcote across the border. . . . We maybe passed your family going the other way. The bodies piled high . . . the trains piling into stations full of dead families. Hai Ram. What we have seen. . . .” (73)

Sisters lost to marauding mobs, Sikhs shearing their hair in train carriages, men’s heads chopped off as yanked-down trousers yielded evidence of circumcision—overhearing these stories, Meena realizes that the past for her parents was no sentimental journey but “a murky bottomless pool full of monsters . . . a deceptively still surface and a deadly undercurrent” (75).

Two levels of memorial recall operate here: the elders remembering what had happened, and the adult author remembering them remembering. This memory of a memory lurks as a dark hinterland to the comedic vision of a diasporic subjectivity developing out

of the two strands of Meena’s childhood: life outside the home, where she roams Tollington with her white British friends, and life inside the home, the site of a domestic and hospitable Punjabi culture. How do we analyze this undigested fragment that seems extraneous to the narrative task of reconciling these strands? The concept of “postmemory” provides a cue: “Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that they can neither understand nor create. . . . [It is] a space of remembrance, more broadly available through cultural and public, and not merely individual and personal, acts of remembrance, identification and projection.”¹⁹

Within Syal’s narrative, however, the postmemory of partition belongs to neither the public nor the personal sphere but to an alternative community space that is somewhere in between: a reconstituted Punjabiness that exists behind closed suburban doors. To understand the relationship between postmemory and narrative arising out of trauma, we have to develop conceptual grids more complex than Hirsch’s distinctions between cultural and public, on the one hand, and individual and personal, on the other. The diasporic position that obliges Syal to operate, at least initially, from the margins of British public culture, and the tensions and complications between memory and narrative that we have noted, including the compulsions to silence, are not dissimilar to those that shape partition novels written by women. To understand better those compulsions, we must revisit connections between trauma, memory, and narrative that are now taken almost as axiomatic within Western scholarship.

Following Maurice Halbwachs’s classic study of collective memory, it is agreed that memory is always group memory, “both because the individual is derivative of some collectivity, family and communality, and also because a group is solidified and becomes aware of itself

19. Marianne Hirsch, “Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy,” in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke

Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NH: University of New England Press, 1999), 8.

through continuous reflection upon and recreation of a distinctive, shared memory.”²⁰ Those analyzing the cultural dimension of trauma usually combine “collective memory” with Pierre Janet’s distinctions between narrative memory and traumatic memory. Narrative memory remembers events by locating them at a specific time with a beginning, middle, and end; traumatic memory is actually nonmemory in that “the subject is often incapable of making the necessary narrative which we call memory regarding the event.”²¹ To convert traumatic (non)memory into narrative memory, the traumatic event itself has to be integrated into a story, which in turn must be addressed to someone. Although Janet’s remarks pertained to traumatized individuals, scholars interested in cultural trauma have extended them to groups and communities, often by using the term *cultural memory*.²²

As Mieke Bal explains, “Cultural memory signifies that memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon as well as an individual or social one. . . . We invoke the discourse of cultural memory to mediate or modify difficult or tabooed moments of the past—moments that nonetheless impinge, sometimes fatally, on the present.”²³ Similarly, Antze remarks, “Increasingly memory worth talking about—worth remembering—is memory of trauma.”²⁴ In such analyses, however, the connections between cultural memory and cultural trauma more often than not provide the starting point rather than being subject to scrutiny, with the terms “cultural” and “collective” used interchangeably. The limitations of this position become apparent when we turn to partition narratives. The trauma of 1947 undoubtedly offers a “before” and “after” around which a narrative framework can be erected “to make sense” of what happened. Following Bal, we can argue that such narrative “emplotments” for partition enable women authors, especially, to negotiate this “taboo moment,” thereby transforming “cultural trauma” into “collective memory,” but we

also need to factor in certain complexities peculiar to South Asia.

This point may be illustrated through the example of Sidhwa’s autobiographical novel, *Ice-Candy-Man*, which describes a child, Lenny, growing up in Lahore around the time of partition.²⁵ The violence of partition, although narrated through Lenny’s perspective, is primarily inscribed on the body of her Ayah (nurse). Lenny’s “innocent” eye foregrounds the absurdity of partition through a literalization of metaphor that is equally apt for magic realist play with conventions of representation as for the realist filtering of a disintegrating adult world through a child’s naive perspective: “There is much disturbing talk. India is going to be broken. Can one break a country? And what happens if they break it where our house is? Or crack it further up Warris Road? How will I ever get to Godmother’s then?” (92). The child’s perspective also facilitates an uncomprehending description of the violence and its effects on women. The abduction and rape of Ayah, her subsequent transformation into a dolled-up courtesan that is engineered by the transformation of her most sensuous suitor, Ice-Candy-Man, into mobster, rapist, and glorified pimp; parallel developments that bring the traumatized Hamida from India to Pakistan, where she takes Ayah’s place as Lenny’s new nurse: all these events are reported allusively through the “innocent” voice of Lenny.

Narrating partition through Lenny thus allows Sidhwa to negotiate the delicate issue of sensitively representing violence. It also enables the dissociation of the remembering self from the remembered self, but in a manner that both evades and acknowledges complicity. The political events and their consequences are actually refracted through two narrative levels: the comments and discussions of the adult world, and the voice of Lenny, “speaking” entirely in the present tense. At certain moments, however, the narrative voice becomes unmistakably that of an adult, and, at one point, the narrative voice

20. Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*, 6.

21. Pierre Janet, cited in Bessel A. Van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” in Caruth, *Trauma*, 160.

22. Mieke Bal, introduction to Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer, *Acts of Memory*, vii.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Antze and Lambek, *Tense Past*, i.

25. Bapsi Sidhwa, *Ice-Candy-Man* (London: Heinemann, 1988), published in the United States as *Cracking India*.

transforms itself from first to third person. These formal peculiarities become more marked as we move toward and beyond the moment of partition, and an unsympathetic reader might well judge the narrative style as flawed. I would read these discrepancies, however, as symptomatic of a deeper conflict, traces of which are also left on the epigraphs of the first and final chapters.

Both epigraphs are translated citations of the Urdu poet Mohammed Iqbal:

Shall I hear the lament of the nightingale, submissively lending my ear?
Am I the rose to suffer its cry in silence year after year?
The fire of verse gives me courage and bids me no more to be faint.
With dust in my mouth I am abject; to God I make my complaint.
Sometimes You favour our rivals then sometimes with us You are free.
I am sorry to say it so boldly. You are no less fickle than we. (1)

Give me the (mystic) wine that burns all veils
The wine by which life's secret is revealed,
The wine whose essence is eternity,
The wine which opens mysteries concealed.
Lift up the curtain, give me the power to talk.
And make the sparrow struggle with the hawk.
(275)

These epigraphs chart Sidhwa's own development from the submissive nightingale and silently suffering rose to the heroically struggling sparrow. But what does the struggle between the sparrow and the hawk represent? I read it as the struggle between the discourses that surround the event of partition with silence and as the novelist's attempts to break that silence through her narrative.

Whether in India or in Pakistan, these discourses are similar: "official" narratives both his-

toriographical and popular, which celebrate the achievement of Independence; nationalist discourses, which necessitate the erasure of certain cultural losses; and social codes of honor and shame, which demand silence from traumatized women, not therapeutic narrativizing.²⁶ Sidhwa writes against the grain of all these discourses. Ayah is a Hindu woman; Lenny a Parsi girl. Despite their differences in age and class, both become minority subjects in the new Pakistan, bearing the additional burden of gender. This variously oblique vision is embodied in Lenny's limp—a disability that remains otherwise gratuitous to the narrative. In this context, it is crucial that Lenny—like Sidhwa—represents the Parsis, whose relationship to India and Pakistan remains very different from that of Hindus, Muslims, or even Christians to those new nation-states. Unlike those religious communities, dispersed all across South Asia with vast regional differences, the Parsis are a demographically minute, although traditionally high profile, ethnoreligious group. The self-definition of the Parsis, which the novel reiterates, hinges on their upward mobility, Anglicization and perceived difference from other religious communities around them, including the Sikhs of the Punjab, whose ethnoreligious homogeneity they in fact parallel in many ways.

Lenny's "odd" vision thus focuses on the anxieties of a small elite community neither Hindu, Muslim, nor Sikh, unsure of where to pitch their political fortunes during the run-up to partition.²⁷ In similar fashion, Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* narrates partition and its aftermath from the perspective of a cast of misfit characters who live in unfashionable Old Delhi—an autistic man, his eccentric sister, and the unmarried siblings of a once genteel, now impoverished Hindu family.²⁸ The particular nature of the characters' oddities conveys

26. See Veena Das and Ashis Nandy, "Violence, Vic-timhood, and the Language of Silence," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, n.s., 19 (1985): 177–95; and Kabir, "Subjectivities, Memories, Loss." Also illuminating here are the comments by Krishna Sobti, "Memory and History of the Partition," interview by Alok Bhalla, in *Crossing Boundaries*, ed. Geeti Sen (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1997), 74: "When families of migrants meet, they don't talk about the partition because it is a painful subject. It troubles everyone, especially the women. Most families have let time help

them forget the past, forget even the names of the women who were killed or left behind. I have never heard anyone mentioning the girls who either killed themselves or were abducted. It is a forbidden subject. In our family there were two girls who got left behind. We don't know what happened to them. We like to believe that they are dead. The fate of women during the partition was a great burden on the Hindu mind. Well, not just on the Hindu mind, but on the minds of all those who migrated."

27. See, in this context, T. M. Luhrmann, "The Parsi Predicament in Modern Bombay," in Robben and Suárez-Orozco, *Cultures under Siege*.

28. Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (London: Heinemann, 1980).

metonymically the sterile, residual nature of Old Delhi where time seems not to have moved after partition. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, likewise, the odd child narrator enables Sidhwa to convey a specific dimension of Lahore life. Because the child, in the company of Ayah, can cross the class divide, the narrative can describe the anxieties and bewilderments of the domestic underclass represented by Ayah and her coterie of admirers, and the tensions that increasingly enter their everyday camaraderie (through sexual competition for Ayah). The flawed narrative technique and Lenny's limp together insist that only the odd narrator with the oblique vision can rescue all these lost narratives. They also bear witness to a composite and compromised subjectivity. After all, those who celebrated Independence, in both India and Pakistan, were often the very same people who had been complicit in, witnessed, or experienced the humiliation of women, the disintegration of sacred geographies, and the destruction of cultural ecosystems. While public subjectivity celebrated Independence and identified with the dominant national culture, a private subjectivity developed in response to the need to mourn partition through what Pierre Nora describes as "dominated sites of memory."²⁹

Sidhwa's novel exemplifies how women's partition novels offer examples of these dominated *lieux de mémoire*. They are cultural artifacts generated by the national subject's shock of oddity: a sudden awareness of its distance from the paradigms of public culture. That moment of awareness estranges but also creates bonds that momentarily, or at least potentially, cut across class and national divides—as signified in the three ellipses that end the novel as Ice-Candy-Man slips across the border between India and Pakistan. *Ice-Candy-Man* illustrates how the woman's partition novel functions as testimony and double witness. It is not the reticence of the traumatized individual alone that the would-be testifier to partition struggles against,

but the pressure of official histories and the knowledge that many of the physically assaulted women could never speak of their trauma.³⁰ Sidhwa can write "other histories" only by dint of her doubly cushioned position as elite woman from a minor (and therefore uncontested) minority. Her authorial creativity, the novel itself, arises out of a chasm of guilt bracketed by the two epigraphs. Although Lenny's limp is cured at the end of the narrative, that is, when the sparrow has won the struggle and the novel has "spoken," it is her guilty tongue that speaks, the same tongue that betrayed Ayah by revealing her presence to the mob headed by Ice-Candy-Man.

Subordinate Your Heart to Your Mind: Realism and Other Histories

In this final section, I would like to consolidate the argument that women authors writing partition offer privileged access to "other histories" of partition through self-consciously positioning their novels as a cipher for all lost narratives. Here let me return to Sobti's *Zindaginama*, and the inscription on its frontispiece, which offers the following status for the novel:

That which is not history
And that which is history
Not that
Which in the seats of political power
Together with proofs and evidences
By being entered into historiographical note-
books
Are rendered secure
But instead
That which flows
Together with
The river Bhagirathi of the masses
Throbs and spreads
And remains alive within
The cultural foundation of
Ordinary folk.³¹

Sobti contrasts the stiff boundedness of "official historiography"—its balance sheets of proofs

29. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les lieux de mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (1989): 23. However, one should treat with caution Nora's romanticizing of the idea of the "national"; for a critique, see Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 96–97.

30. In fact, the novel form can be seen as a radically self-conscious and retrospectively form of testimony: one that through the possibilities of narratorial positioning offers opportunities for both distancing and detachment from an otherwise too painful memory.

31. Sobti, *Zindaginama*, frontispiece.

and evidences, its alignment with politics and capital cities—with the organic fluidity of her novel, its liminal position between history and not-history, and its alignment, despite her own elite subject position, with “ordinary folk culture.” I noted earlier that *Zindaginama* re-creates rural Punjab as a prepartition syncretistic cultural utopia.³² In itself, this creation of prepartition utopias is not necessarily a gendered cultural project.³³ Sobti herself describes it as the creative writer’s task of “transform[ing] experience into something that is history from below. When politics, religion and humanism are transmitted in literature, human faith is transformed.”³⁴ Nevertheless, the frontispiece’s contrasts between “hard” and “soft” categories and their implicit resonances with gendered oppositions suggest how a woman novelist might cast within feminine and feminist frameworks both the loss of this utopia and its fictional retrieval.

Several women novelists narrate the story of a young female protagonist on the threshold of adulthood, located within a specific utopian setting (what Antze, following Mikhail Bakhtin, calls a chronotope)³⁵—be it rural Punjab or Bengal, cities like Lahore or Lucknow, or feudal landholdings of North India. The narrative traces three trajectories that demand to be read against each other: the movement toward political independence, the growing up of the young heroine, and the changing character of Utopia itself. The novelists thus reconfigure the freedom struggle as the struggle for personal emancipation, and the trauma of partition as the loss of innocence and girlhood. Qurratulain Hyder’s *Fireflies in the Mist* provides a good example: the story, which begins in undivided Bengal, describes a group of friends, young women who represent different subject positions available to the prepartition Bengali:

Christian, Hindu, secular Muslim, feudal Muslim, and so on.³⁶ As the novel progresses, their friendships are undermined by their developing political sensibilities, and these diverging viewpoints are offset by nostalgic evocations to Bengali Sufi and folk culture in a manner that parallels Sobti’s reconstructions of rural Punjab. We gradually realize that the women, and their disintegrating friendships, represent none other than India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

Such an intertwining of the personal, the political, and the topographical provides a gendered and culture-specific twist to Fredric Jameson’s claim that “all third world literature aspires to national allegory.”³⁷ This tendency is well illustrated in one of the best-known and earliest of women’s partition novels written in English, Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*.³⁸ The protagonist, Laila, belongs to a distinguished Muslim family of Lucknow, one of the fabled cities of prepartition North Indian culture. As the novel progresses, politics invades the domestic space, with personality differences between Laila and her cousins increasingly rewritten as differences of political stance vis-à-vis the anticolonial struggle. Laila’s personal struggles against the forces that have shaped her childhood—feudalism, British colonialism, and tradition, within which Islam and North Indian social customs equally inhere—become indistinguishable from the struggle for independence on the political canvas. The protagonist’s ability to shape her own future, especially manifested in the choice of life partner, merges with the necessity of choosing one’s own political destiny. Laila’s choice of Ameer, an “unsuitable” man from an impoverished family, reflects both her independence and her partition from her family’s dominant views, including those of her beloved aunt Abida and her cousin Zahra.

32. Sobti’s reference to the river Bhagirathi recalls Qurratulain Hyder’s *River of Fire* (New Delhi: Kali For Women, 1998), which emplots partition within a vast canvas of Indian history stretching from the fourth century BC onward to the post-partition moment. The reappearance of the central characters at different stages of this history—Buddhist, Mughal, colonial, and so on—demonstrates its cyclical nature. Like the river Ganges, history ebbs and flows, alternating between moments of syncretism and moments of violent rupture, of which partition is presented as one.

33. See, for instance, the sensitive reading of Khushwant Singh’s novel *Train to Pakistan*, by Kaul, *Partitions of Memory*, 12–18.

34. Sobti, “Memory and History,” 56; she goes on to add: “I do feel in my inner recesses a certain richness that is part of our common heritage. Nanak, Baba Farid, Amir Khusro, Jayasi, Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah, Shah Latif—can we divide this whole lot of poets between yours and ours? No doubt we divided the territory—but tradition, art, literature are not like geographical areas: they continue to remain undivided, indivisible.”

35. Antze and Lambek, *Tense Past*, xxvi.

36. Qurratulain Hyder, *Fireflies in the Mist: A Novel* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1994).

37. Fredric Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text*, no. 15 (1986): 65–88.

38. Attia Hosain, *Sunlight on a Broken Column: A Novel* (London: Chatto and Windus: 1961).

The clash between the female subject on the threshold of personal and political freedom, and the emotional bonds that tie her to the past, also defines the author's evocation of the highly refined feudal culture of Lucknow, including its gendered public and domestic spaces. The novel's first section presents a detailed and loving evocation of the rites and rituals of Lucknow life, a life already poised on the brink of disappearance—as the opening scene, the death of Laila's grandfather, suggests. The first sentence clearly sets out the connections between that impending death and fundamental changes in the old order: "The day my aunt Abida moved from the zenana into the guest-room off the corridor that led to the men's wing of the house, within call of her father's room, we knew Baba Jan had not much longer to live" (14).

First, independence and the concomitant changes in lifestyle appear entailed by what we can call narrative determinism; second, the connections immediately set up by the old order and the segregation of women insist that these changes are to be welcomed. Yet the entire novel oscillates between this latter conviction, born out of the author's left-wing political affiliations as a member of the Progressive Writers Union³⁹ and a sadness at the changes that have been incurred thereby: the breakup of Laila's family when Independence is finally achieved, as several members opt for Pakistan, and the loss of old Lucknow even to those who remain in India.

This sadness crystallizes within the novel's short concluding section, when, after Independence, Laila returns to Lucknow as a visitor:

Tattered settlements for refugees had erupted on once open spaces. Ugly buildings had sprung up, conceived by ill-digested modernity and the hasty needs of a growing city.

My eyes saw with the complex vision of my nostalgia and sadness the loved arches and domes and finials, the curve of the river, the branching of the roads, the unfamiliar names and changed lettering of the road signs, the ru-

ined Residency on its green elevation without a flag, the proud Club that had been a Palace and was now a research institute, the pedestal without its marble Empress and with a vagrant lying across it in deep sleep, the faded feudal mansions, the Mall with its new shops and restaurants and cinemas, pavement booths as in a bazaar cluttered with tawdry signs, the old Church with a new annexe to the school and where the children no longer sang "God Save the King," the Government House flagstaff carrying the tricolor, the quiet, deep-shadowed trees lining the road.

...

I was nearly home. (270)

The aesthetic contrast between past and present urges us to reconsider what the narrator cannot articulate without betraying the author's political commitment to the necessity of the new order. The author's love for all that is fine, beautiful, and old, defined by the lineaments of an aristocratic high culture, is fundamentally at odds with a narrative framework that rationalizes the trauma of partition as necessary for the emergence of the democratic, progressive, and secular female citizen. The struggle between the sparrow and the hawk returns, embodied here in the author's divided subjectivity, caught between a rationalized narrative plotment of partition and an emotional residue that it cannot accommodate.

"Life will teach you to subordinate your heart to your mind" (62). This advice, dispensed by Aunt Abida, offers Laila and the readers the moral of this Janus-faced tale. Made in the context of Abida's impeccably sensible but, to Laila's eyes, heartless response to a tenant's petition, this remark presages Abida's acceptance of a marriage proposal that strikes Laila as equally unsatisfactory. It also reaches out beyond Abida's marriage to the dissatisfactions that creep later into Laila's relationship with Ameer, suggesting that whatever the ideological grid a woman is locked into, compromise is inevitable. Following the allegorical logic of the novel, the "subordination of heart to mind"

39. For Hosain's political affiliations, see Patrick Colm Hogan, *Colonialism and Cultural Identity: Crises of Tradition in the Anglophone Literatures of India, Africa, and the Caribbean* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 257–303.

applies equally to the decolonized subject's tightrope walk between the gains of Independence and the losses of partition. These multiple resonances are enabled not only by what Antze has called the "radical, often transformative break in the flow of a life narrative" offered by the traumatic event,⁴⁰ but also by the novel's narrative assimilation of the trauma of partition to the defining transformative break in the traditional life narrative of the South Asian woman: the departure from the natal to the marital home, and the irreversible changes it entails.

In her perspicacious analysis of oral testimonies of female partition survivors, Das draws attention to how traumatized women explicated their postpartition silence in terms of the traditional contrast between "the freedom of a girl in her father's house to speak as she wishes with the constraints in the husband's house where she has to be guarded in her utterances." Thus dividing the world into "that in which speech is possible and that in which it becomes taboo" means that silence is not merely the repression of trauma (on the model of Holocaust survivors' testimonies); rather, silence itself becomes integrated into a cultural narrative that translates the traumatic movement from old to the new into the traumatic movement from the natal to the marital home. As Das explains with reference to Manjeet, a partition survivor, "silence was good for the new *watan* (country) to which they had come for when 'a woman is happily married, carelessly uttered words can disrupt her whole world.' By refusing to elicit speech on her experience in the village where she was ambushed, and allowing her to socially 'forget' her experiences, the society allowed her to be treated as a woman whose life could unfold itself in accordance with a traditional telos."⁴¹

From this perspective, testifying, or speaking out, can be emancipatory but also disorienting, and I would read the ambivalences embedded within women's partition novels also in this light. The analogy between the birth of the nation and the coming of age of the female citizen further enables these authors to ap-

propriate the configuration of India as woman in nationalist discourse, especially in the debates concerning tradition and modernity, religion and secularism, and shame and honor that have surrounded the self-fashioning of the Indian state from its incipience.⁴² But to make nostalgic sense, they draw on the traditional woman's narrative of leaving the father's house. The narratives trade off one kind of freedom—innocence—against another: independence. The chronotope of lost Utopia thus takes on added resonances, as is apparent in Sobti's comment on her own prepartition life: "When I think of Lahore, I go back to the days of my youth just before Partition. Life then was so romantic, slow, deep and beautiful. Really they were good times, they were great times."⁴³

Sobti's nostalgia for the slow pace of a time anterior to trauma draws attention to the ability of realist narrative to mimic the flow of life before and after a traumatic event. As Bim, one of the "odd" characters through whose lives we see Old Delhi, observes in *Clear Light of Day*:

Isn't it strange, how life won't flow, like a river, but moves in jumps, as if it were held back by locks that are opened now and then to let it jump forwards in a kind of flood? There are these long still stretches—nothing happens—each day is exactly like the other—plodding, uneventful—and then suddenly there is a crash—mighty deeds take place—momentous events—even if one doesn't know it at the time—and then life subsides again into the backwaters till the next push, the next flood? That summer was certainly one of them—the summer of '47. (42–43)

After this metanarrative remark that ends the first chapter set in the postpartition present, the second chapter abruptly takes the readers to 1947, with the opening statement, "the city was in flames that summer" (44). Trauma becomes a way to negotiate an even deeper entry into the protagonists' childhoods in the third chapter, with the fourth chapter returning to the present moment after this almost cathartic encounter with life before partition.

40. Antze and Lambek, *Tense Past*, xxvi.

41. Das, "Composition of the Personal Voice," 70.

42. For which see Butalia, *Other Side of Silence*; Bhasin and Menon, *Borders and Boundaries*; and Das, *Critical Events*, 53–83.

43. Sobti, "Memory and History," 78.

In *Clear Light of Day*, Desai's use of flashback—a common technique within narrative realism—articulates partition as a pivotal moment for the construction of memory, Old Delhi, and the novel. As this example suggests, at least two purposes are served by the adoption of what we may term a modernist, even social realist narrative mode, and its attendant codes and devices, within women's novels on partition. First, a variation in narrative pace itself, or a complete change in reporting style, conveys what semiotically and ethically is impossible to describe: the violence of partition and its disruption of ordinary routine. This point is also illustrated by the difference of length between the first three, prepartition sections of *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, all roughly the same number of pages, and the extremely short final section that resumes the story several years after partition. Between the first three sections and the final one, therefore, lies the traumatic moment of 1947 itself that, however minimized by the authorial strategy of sectioning the narrative, cannot be squeezed out of existence.

Second, connected to the ambivalences we focused on earlier, realist techniques enable the narrative to linger, through thick description, over the spaces of the prepartition past. Very often this descriptive lingering focuses the reader's attention on sites of memory that are, again, at odds with the narrative project of rationalizing away the cultural losses of partition. For progressive writers such as Attia Hosain, these sites of memory are typically the spaces and rituals of the feudal, aristocratic past—including the profoundly domestic and therefore inevitably gendered trees, gardens, and courtyards. In the Urdu novel *Dastak Na Doo*, by the Pakistani author Altaf Fatimah, mango trees in the prepartition home become variously the locus for a girl child's rebelliousness and a feudal father's careful cultivation of rare hybrid

strains of fruit, signifying the cultivation of a way of life as the practice of memory as well as the first omens of the old order's disappearance.⁴⁴ Even the ironic, postmemorial reconstruction of prepartition Utopia in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is fissured by descriptive acknowledgment of such losses, as sprawling orchards in prepartition Amritsar are replaced by the cramped homes of democratic and independent India.⁴⁵

For women novelists writing the partition of India, therefore, social realism fulfills the functions that Ian Cleary assigns to social realist narratives of the Palestinian Resistance: "Thick description and vigilant social observation, . . . a testimonial or documentary capacity that promises a full and faithful account . . . unmatched by any other narrative mode."⁴⁶ Conveying simultaneously both the promises of Independence and the cultural losses of partition sustained by the gendered subject, these novels by women and about women demonstrate the "constitutive centrality"⁴⁷ of gender and sexuality within the processes whereby "cultural formations, including symbols, folk models, and rituals [are] mobilized to inscribe, resist and heal trauma."⁴⁸ In thereby performing functions that, "though historical, cannot be fulfilled by the work of the historian,"⁴⁹ they solicit what has been called a "vigilant or critical reading" of literature as the entry point into the relationship between the violence of 1947 and present manifestations of violence in South Asia.⁵⁰ It is with this capacity in mind, indeed, that Indian historians and pedagogues have suggested that partition literature be a supplement to the teaching of the history of Independence in schools and colleges.⁵¹

And yet, one is left with a larger question: does the reading of such novels today, and indeed, narrative itself, offer the best possible means of mourning past losses? Or have we

44. Altaf Fatimah, *The One Who Did Not Ask (Dastak na Doo)*, trans. Rukhsana Ahmad (Oxford: Heinemann, 1993).

45. Manju Kapur, *Difficult Daughters* (London: Faber, 1999). I discuss this aspect of the novel further in my "Abuses of Authority: Colonial Pedagogy, English Literature, and Shakespeare in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*," *Upstart Crow: A Journal of Shakespeare Studies* 21 (2002): 127–37.

46. Tom Cleary, *Literature, Partition, and the Nation-State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel, and Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 191.

47. Kaul, *Partitions of Memory*, 16.

48. Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, "Interdisciplinary Perspectives," in Robben and Suárez-Orozco, *Cultures under Siege*, 2–3.

49. Ernst Van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 37.

50. See Kaul, *Partitions of Memory*, 13.

51. See Krishna Kumar, *Prejudice and Pride: Selected Histories of the Freedom Struggle in India and Pakistan* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2001).

moved to a stage where the narrative return to an event that continues to affect well over a billion human beings is inevitably accompanied by the risk of falling into default positions of anger and blame?⁵²

Beyond Narrative, the Void:

A Coda on Collective Mourning

It is 29 November 2002: Deshbandhu College, New Delhi. In a chemistry lecture room turned film theater, about a hundred undergraduates are viewing the final episodes of *Tamas* (*Darkness*), a television serial from the 1980s about the partition of India. On the screen, an elderly Sikh couple hobble away from the charred remains of a home looted by Muslim mobs. The man clutches his rifle and tells his wife: “Look here, if we are attacked, I’ll kill you first and then kill myself.” The audience bursts into uproarious laughter. When pressed to explain what they found funny in this sequence, they are at a loss for words. Their responses range from the bizarre (“It was touching to see how much he cared for her in old age”) to the disturbing (“Why did the film not depict Muslim men who wanted to kill their wives?”). The discussion moves on to high politics versus the masses, the British as colonial rulers, and issues of accountability. Left behind in the medley of questions, counterquestions, and half-digested facts of schoolbook history is the forgotten business of their unexpected laughter.⁵³

The Sikh man’s injunction to his wife clearly referred to the honor killings of Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu women by their own menfolk during partition in preference to the women’s rape and abduction by men of “other” groups. The out-of-place laughter of a young audience confronted with this, one of the most traumatic episodes of its collective past, urges us today to reconsider the representation and consumption of that past in popular and academic domains. Such laughter signals bewilderment, even embarrassment. Their inability to respond as a peer group to the reenactment of trauma may be contrasted with the intrafamilial, inter-

generational bonding that resulted from the pan-Indian televising of serials on the partition of India (*Tamas*, *Buniyaad*, *Hum Log*) during the 1980s. In the words of a lecturer at Deshbandhu College: “My grandparents did not ever want to speak about Partition. But when *Tamas* began, we did not know whether to watch [it] or not. From dinnertime onwards to 9.30 pm, when it would begin, we would feel a strange restlessness [*ajeeb bechaini si lagti thi*]. Should we watch, should we not?”

This “strange restlessness” of families carrying with them horrific memories of displacement, rape, and honor killing of women, and the struggles of rehabilitation, faced with the narrativizing of those stories through television drama, points to the latter’s impact on the traumatized family. However, their impact did not leave the family and discrete living rooms to generate a sense of collective identity across partition survivors from different families, their children, and their grandchildren.

It is not only the banalizing medium of television that thus stymied the possibility of collective mourning for a shared traumatic event: as the responses of the students at Deshbandhu College suggested, it is also the very fact of returning to the traumatic event through narrative, whatever be the medium—television, film, or indeed the novels that we have examined. There are several reasons for this failure of narrative. As we noted earlier, “history,” especially as manifested in school and college textbooks, glosses over partition, while the traumatic memories of individuals from displaced and divided families are allowed to make their way into literature, art, television, film, and testimonials. An obvious consequence of this partitioning of discursive realms has meant that partition has been mourned within families or, at best, within regional communities. It has never formed a pivot around which children across the nation can be socialized to create a collective awareness of, and responsibility for, the past—as, for instance, has happened in postwar Germany. The evacuation of the subject of partition from

52. Similar fears about the reception of the Holocaust are expressed by Geoffrey H. Hartmann, “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies,” *New Literary History* 26 (1995): 537–63.

53. I thank Urvashi Butalia for taking me to this event at Deshbandhu College.

the public domain—its repression—has instead led to its return in the form of myriad oppressions, separatist demands, and sectarian violence within contemporary India, not to speak of the deteriorating relationship between India and Pakistan. While it has been recognized that “we live in a polity that compulsively re-enacts that original divide,”⁵⁴ what has not been remarked on is that this lamination and sedimentation of multiple traumas in turn has made narrative itself a contested site.⁵⁵

The novels of the women authors discussed above represent attempts to re-create and recuperate, through narrative, a life anterior to trauma whose loss formed the fabric of postpartition life. However nostalgic or recuperative, such narratives compulsively return to the moment of violence and rupture that, furthermore, overwrites “language as a precondition for experiencing history.”⁵⁶ Whose partition do we then talk about? Sikh, Hindu, or Muslim? Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, diasporic? The narrative frames that we erect to repair post-traumatic semiotic rupture imply perspective, closure, rationalization. Narratives of contested moments can help reintegrate traumatic memory into the psyche of a specific group—in the case under scrutiny, of women survivors of partition. But the hermeneutics of causality imposed by narrative form—its beginning, middle, and end—means that someone’s point of view is always involved in retelling partition.⁵⁷ The affective structures that work alongside narrative to recall the prepartition world, and bear witness to women’s experiences, are elusive to generations for whom that world is obtainable only through postmemory, not lived memory. In the absence of affect, the structures of narrative perhaps do little other than predicate readers into default positions of “for” or “against,” especially when the narratives concern the emotional topic of “women’s honor.”

The immediate postpartition moment was perhaps when the production of partition narratives in the aftermath of fratricide could, or should, have been successfully incorporated into nation-building exercises that would have created “narrative literacy” among South Asian middle classes. This “narrative literacy” could have formed the basis not only for collective, cross-regional mourning through the consumption of subsequent partition narratives but also, perhaps, for reconciliation across national borders. But these are counterfactual arguments. Surveying the contested memorial terrain of South Asia today, it appears that memory can now become “a repository of the sublime”⁵⁸ only when the imagination escapes the prison house of narrative. For instance, music and different genres in the visual arts perhaps offer better options for mobilizing nations increasingly fractured along religious and ethnic lines to mourn the moment “when it all began.” Rather than the linear teleologies of narrative, we need non-narrative forms of commemorating the past—such as the abrupt angles and vertical void architecturally inscribed by Daniel Libeskind within Berlin’s new Jewish Museum.⁵⁹

Like the Holocaust, partition was a void that ultimately remains beyond the capacities of narrative to replenish and that is ever more difficult to negotiate with temporal distance from the event. Partition narratives today can therefore be deployed to trigger individual processes of introspection, remembrance, and mourning. However, one senses that mourning on a collective level has to embark through radical, nonnarrative works of the imagination that foreground that void’s untranslatability into narrative. Only then can we, the inheritors of one of the major tragedies of the twentieth century, heal through the shared realization that “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, [and] history is precisely the ways we are implicated in each other’s trauma.”⁶⁰ §

54. Kaul, *Partitions of Memory*, 4.

55. For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Kabir, “Subjectivities, Memories, Loss.”

56. Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, 42.

57. For similar narrative effects in the context of the Holocaust, see Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, 60–64.

58. *Ibid.*, 195.

59. For the architectural voids of contemporary Berlin, including the Jewish Museum, see Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 48–84. See also my discussion of partition, traumatic postmemory, and musical healing in Ananya Jahanara Kabir, “Musical Recall: Postmemory and the Punjabi Diaspora,” *Alif: Journal of Contemporary Poetics*, no. 24 (2004): 172–89.

60. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 24.